

**Fictional Liberalism, Novel Democracy: The Postwar American Novel and  
the State of American Liberal Democracy**

by  
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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and composition and that it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## ABSTRACT

That the fundamental tension between liberalism and democracy, the two founding imperatives of the American political tradition, has been an important theme of the American novel is obvious when one considers the contribution that writers of the stature of Melville, Hawthorne, Twain, James, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck have made to the discussion of liberal democracy in America. Richard Rorty has recently offered the view that there is little value in exploring the work of contemporary novelists for their assessments of the state of American civil and political life since, "in America, at the end of the twentieth century, few inspiring images and stories are being proffered," with those examples of literary "elite culture" that are produced (he does single out the novel) being "written in tones of either self-mockery or of self-disgust" (*Achieving our Country*: 1998, 4-6). It is my contention that rather than being consummate connoisseurs of political despondency, many prominent postwar American novelists continue to participate in the ongoing theoretical and political discussion amongst historiographers, political theorists, literary critics, essayists, and journalists, that perennially surrounds the subject of the state of American liberal democracy. By looking at specific novels by Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, and Don DeLillo, I explore, not just the contribution of these postwar novelists to the vitality of contemporary American political debate, but also how the ideas, issues, themes, ideologies, quarrels, and histories that have defined the development of liberal democracy and liberal democratic theory in postwar America, provide a useful and illuminating context in which to read the work of some of America's most important contemporary novelists.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	3
 <b>CHAPTER ONE</b>	
The Ascension of Technocorporatism and the Crisis of Liberal Democratic Citizenship in Norman Mailer's <i>The Naked and the Dead</i> and <i>The Armies of the Night</i>	16
"The shits are killing us": The Ascension of the Technocrat and the Corporatist Challenge to Liberal Democracy in Norman Mailer's <i>The Naked and the Dead</i>	21
"So political and so primitive": Citizenship, Political Action, and the Vitality of American Liberal Democracy in <i>The Armies of the Night</i>	40
 <b>CHAPTER TWO</b>	
Haunted Democracy: Secrecy, Paranoia and Legitimacy in Norman Mailer's <i>Harlot's Ghost</i> , and Don DeLillo's <i>Libra</i> and <i>Underworld</i>	63
Spooks and Agencies: <i>Harlot's Ghost</i> as a Response to the Culture of Secrecy	67
"Clear Sighted" and "Reasonable": <i>Libra</i> as a Response to the Politics of Conspiracy	81
"Nothing you can believe is not coming true": <i>Underworld</i> and the End of the Cold War Gothic	103
 <b>CHAPTER THREE</b>	
Just <i>Vineland</i> ?: Pynchon's Vision of Hope, Justice and the State of American Liberal Democracy	132
Of Murals and the Megastate: Postwar American Liberalism and Pynchon's Discontent	142
Emerson in <i>Vineland</i> : Pynchon and the "Principle of Compensation"	169
 <b>CHAPTER FOUR</b>	
"The Real American Crazy Shit": Democratic Individuality in Philip Roth's "American Trilogy"	185

Roth and the Party of Irony: Adamism and Individualism in <i>The American Pastoral</i>	191
"All the brutish American stuff": McCarthy and the Betrayal of Lincolnian Individualism in <i>I Married a Communist</i>	216
Passing Dangers: Self-Construction and Sanctimony in <i>The Human Stain</i>	225
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	234
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	243

## INTRODUCTION

What a curiosity is our Democracy, what a mystery. No novelist unwinds a narrative so well.

--Norman Mailer, from "Nixon's Fall"

One of the ways to approach the American novel, as Ralph Ellison has suggested, is to see it as a "function of American democracy" (Ellison 308). Part of what he means by this is that the form of the novel seems to suit the kind of societal, political, and aesthetic shifts that are a constant in a nation which asserts its dedication to the often-conflicting principles of liberty and equality, to the political idea of liberal democracy. The novel, as Ellison would have it, is the literary form best able to engage in conversation with the complexity and diversity of the American experience, and particularly to represent the often wide gap between the liberal democratic ideals that America professes and their social, political, and cultural realization. In the hands of Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Mark Twain, argues Ellison, the novel "suggested possibilities, courses of action, stances against chaos," it helped to "create the American conception of America" (316). In general terms, this dissertation is a study of four of postwar America's most important novelists—Norman Mailer, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and Philip Roth— and the critique of the state of American liberal democracy which each offers as an element of his fiction. It attempts to demonstrate the manner in which these novelists engage with and participate in current and ongoing theoretical and political discussions amongst political philosophers, historiographers, literary critics, journalists, essayists, and other writers, concerning the many issues surrounding the nature and vitality of postwar American liberal democracy.

In relation to its capacity and willingness to live up to the demands placed on the American novel as a “function of American democracy,” as a literary forum where the social and political predicament of the nation is made to wrestle with the liberal democratic faith in its possibilities, the postwar novel has often come in for criticism. Ellison himself finds, in the postwar novel, a lack of “a certain necessary faith in human possibility before the next unknown,” and more recently, Richard Rorty, in his book *Achieving Our Country*, has offered the view that there is little use in searching the work of contemporary American novelists for their assessments of the state of American liberal democracy since, “in America, at the end of the twentieth century, few inspiring images and stories are being proffered,” with those examples of literary “elite culture” that are produced being “written in tones of either self-mockery or of self-disgust” (Rorty 4-6). By looking in depth at specific novels by four prominent postwar novelists—Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Armies of the Night*, and *Harlot’s Ghost*; Pynchon’s *Vineland*; DeLillo’s *Libra* and *Underworld*; and Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain* (“The American Trilogy”)—I attempt to demonstrate that in fact liberal democratic faith remains a vital theme and issue for these authors, or at least one that has not yet been fully displaced by disillusionment, despair, or disgust concerning the possibilities suggested by the ideals of liberalism and democracy. Choosing to focus on specific postwar novelists and novels, rather than surveying the whole period, allows for a more rigorous and differentiated picture of the American novel’s continuing investment in the debates and arguments surrounding the state of American liberal democracy to emerge.

To frame this study I broadly focus on four central liberal democratic themes—citizenship, legitimacy, justice, and individualism—dedicating one chapter to each. I say “broadly focus” because each fundamental theme will provide a point of departure for a discussion that will seek out those areas, related to the main theme, where the concerns of the novels in question intersect with matters pertinent to relevant political issues, or central to specific interpretations of historical or political developments. The constellation of political, social, and cultural concerns related to liberal democracy raised in the work of these four novelists is in itself evidence that liberalism and democracy remain not only relevant, but crucial terms in the vocabulary which the postwar American novel, or at least these specific exponents of it, use to navigate the ever-shifting waves of the American experience. Rather than consummate connoisseurs of political despondency, the American novelists featured demonstrate a kind of obstinate faith in America’s first principles of liberalism and democracy in the midst of the often-strident critique of contemporary American political culture and institutions that one confronts in their work. In this regard they are correlate in tone with some of the most idiosyncratic voices in American postwar political philosophy and theory, thinkers like Sheldon Wolin, Christopher Lasch, and George Kateb, whose perspectives and conceptual approaches will function as something of a compass to provide some guidance through the political depths that the novels in question traverse.

Just as important, however, are the imaginative, formal, and distinctly literary resources that these novelists have at hand when they venture into these political waters. The idioms, conventions, and literary traditions on which Mailer,

Pynchon, DeLillo, and Roth draw to help structure their narratives and elucidate their themes both inform and emerge from the nature of the political critique which they offer. Thus Mailer's allegorical approach to the "war novel" in *The Naked and the Dead*, DeLillo's ironic use of conspiracy narrative and Gothic imagery in *Underworld*, the tempered pragmatism of Pynchon's appeal to elements of pastoralism and the jeremiad in *Vineland*, and Roth's reimagining of the mythic and literary conventions of the Adamic tradition in American literature in *American Pastoral*, all exhibit an insistent interest in the potential of characteristically literary concerns and preoccupations to engage with moral and topical matters more immediately relevant to the state of liberal democratic politics in America. By employing symbolic resources associated with the literary, and often with the American novel in particular, these writers acknowledge the strength and potential of American liberal democratic ideals, principles, and traditions to continue to appeal to the imagination, while also emphasizing the distance between those principles and their implementation and practice in postwar America.

The general condition of the American liberal democratic imagination is one of the overriding themes shared by the novelists discussed here, a concern that is inseparable from the particular issues surrounding developments in postwar American politics and political institutions that capture their attention in specific novels. The decline of a progressive and populist inspired liberalism and the rise of a more apolitical mode of politics that has done much to impoverish the public sphere in postwar America is registered in the effort undertaken by these novelists to dramatize the damage done to the morale of the American liberal democratic

imagination by developments in American political and social life such as: the nature of the expansion of state and corporate power following WW II, the broad diminishment of American civil society and popular political engagement, the distrust and paranoia engendered by the cold war “culture of secrecy,” the growing disillusionment with the idea of a common America in the wake of the Vietnam war, and the near-abandonment of the notion of individualism to a reductive economic conception that has solidified at the heart of an ascendant neo-conservatism in America. Against this background, I will argue, Mailer, DeLillo, Pynchon, and Roth offer fictions that pursue avenues of insightful critique, comment, and often condemnation of these developments, but also suggest responses to them, evoking elements of liberal democratic faith and possibility, however tempered, which emanate in their representations of modes of resistance, hopeful artistic visions, and often nostalgic recollections of the recent past, as well as suggestive appeals to a Lincolnian conception of individual self-invention, a Jeffersonian notion of democratic revolution, and an Emersonian affirmation of justice.

The first chapter begins by looking at the themes and issues related to the crisis of liberal democratic citizenship raised in Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, and particularly to Mailer’s concerns regarding the emergence of an apolitical and anti-democratic style of politics in postwar America, articulated in the novel’s allegorical presentation of the decline of liberalism and the increasingly technocratic and corporatist tendencies of the American state and of American politics. Mailer offers a diagnosis of these tendencies as totalitarian and depicts the diminishment of the vitalizing tension between the right and the left in



America, often referred to as “the end of ideology,” as a kind of paralysis of politics, the colonization of the American liberal democratic imagination by the stifling logic of the technocrat. In *The Armies of the Night*, and against this general drift towards the apolitical, Mailer affirms a mode of political action that asserts both the idea of the revolutionary central to the principle of democratic participation and the experience of existential subjectivity which Mailer posits as a vital element of the notion of individual freedom rooted in the American liberal tradition. For Mailer, the fundamental tension which marks liberal democracy, between the demands of democratic politics and the principle of liberal freedom, lends citizenship the kind of dynamic and existential quality which Mailer pits against the stagnant and instrumental character of the mode of anti-politics he identifies with the technocratic and corporatist challenge to the American liberal democratic imagination. While recognizing the concessions and compromises which participation in a democratic public life demand from the individual, the “theory of citizenship,” if it can be called that, which sustains Mailer’s narrative in *The Armies of the Night*, argues toward a renewal of the foundational idea of the revolutionary in American politics as both a means of resisting the “totalitarian” psychology which Mailer detects at the heart of the postwar ascendancy of technocorporatist ideology, and an expression of democratic individuality, a performance of individual subjectivity made possible by the experience of the contingency and plurality of values in the political realm.

Mailer’s diagnosis of the blight of technocratic and anti-democratic tendencies in postwar American politics and political institutions also sets the stage for Chapter Two, as Mailer turns his attentions, in *Harlot’s Ghost*, to the

ambiguous presence of the CIA in postwar American political life. Focusing on Mailer's narrative foray into the peculiar bureaucratic world of "the agency" at the heart of the cold war "culture of secrecy" as a continuation of his abiding interest in the apolitical and democratically illegitimate forces at work within postwar America, *Harlot's Ghost* provides a handy thematic bridge to the more extensive discussion of two novels by Don DeLillo, *Libra* and *Underworld*, which are the primary focus of the chapter. The rampant suspiciousness and pessimism that are central elements of DeLillo's fiction reflect the dominant political mood that DeLillo detects in the nation and age in which he writes. In *Libra*, DeLillo's fictional account of the events surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the cogency and relevance of conspiracy narrative is both affirmed and undermined, as DeLillo fashions a narrative perspective that works between the explanatory pillars offered by conspiracy and coincidence as a response to what DeLillo refers to as the "gloom [...] of unknowing" which the uncertainty and skepticism regarding the official explanation of the assassination still evokes in the American popular consciousness. Counterpoised between paranoia and contingency DeLillo's narrative mode, in *Libra*, calls attention to the crisis of confidence in the liberal democratic legitimacy of American political institutions that has accompanied the intensification of systemic power and state secrecy in postwar America, while also affirming a persistent populist desire within the American political imagination for a more democratic engagement with those forces—economic, political, and social—which shape and influence events and individual circumstances in American life. In this way the conspiratorial narrative, a mode in which *Libra* both operates and intervenes, is utilized as a style of

critique, a way of dramatizing the important social and political shifts which the popularity of conspiracy theory underlines, while also functioning as recognizable evidence of an active liberal democratic impulse, one which reacts against the erosion of democratic legitimacy and the degradation of liberal individuality, but whose appeals to a logic in which neither exist or are possible are often made at the expense of a conception of individual political resistance or democratic action capable of affirming a sense of effective political agency or the possibilities offered by popular political engagement.

In *Underworld*, DeLillo broadens his narrative scope beyond the events and uncertainties surrounding the Kennedy assassination to encompass nearly the entire postwar era, tracing developments in the form and nature of paranoia and skepticism in the American consciousness from the nuclear-age anxieties shaped by the bi-polar tension and the expansion of the security state characteristic of the cold war era, through to the post-cold war period of expanding globalization and the growing trepidation and unease regarding social fragmentation and environmental disaster. Utilizing Gothic conventions and imagery, DeLillo's novel portrays a world haunted by forces and systems of power whose expansion and increasing complexity give rise to an atmosphere of pervasive anxiety and suspiciousness that DeLillo explores in his dramatization, not only of some of the central historical events and figures of the postwar period in America, but also in the fragments of life on the streets, discussions in the workplace, and the experiences of the classroom which *Underworld* develops as a kind of counterhistory, or what DeLillo has called "the lost history that becomes the detailed weave of novels" ("Power" 5). While there is little doubt that DeLillo's

work reflects the widespread cynicism and pessimism which he recognizes as a central element of the period's popular political and cultural disposition, the sympathetic manner in which he incorporates into his narrative perspective hopeful artistic visions, nostalgic recollections of community, inchoate yearnings in his characters to escape from the demoralizing forces which circumscribe contemporary life, and a thematic interest in the possibility of redemption and renewal is a clear indication that his work is not wholly given over to the primary mood it represents, but in fact seeks to both critique and respond to that pessimism and suspicion by preserving an adversarial sense of political agency and individual selfhood as part of its vision. It should be pointed out that the discussion of paranoia and conspiracism undertaken here does not address the effects of the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York, an event which, while undoubtedly a central development in the nature of post-cold war fears and anxieties in America, falls outside of the narrative and historical scope of *Underworld* (1997).<sup>1</sup>

The narrative of Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* also ranges broadly across postwar American social and political history, a period which has witnessed a significant decline in the fortunes of progressive and reform politics in America, developments which are central to the thematic concerns of what is often considered Pynchon's most political novel to date. At issue in Chapter Three is the determinate nature of the political ideas underlying the critique of the state of American democratic politics which Pynchon undertakes in his work, and specifically the extent to which Pynchon can be said to be an exponent of a form

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<sup>1</sup> For a sense of DeLillo's perspective on post- 9/11 America see his recently published novel *Cosmopolis* (2003).

of pragmatism that is consistent with liberal democratic principles. The themes of justice and the expansion and abuse of state power dominate *Vineland's* staging of the waning influence of liberal and progressive ideals in contemporary America, as Pynchon dramatizes the impact of the New Deal, the decline of the New Left, and the ascension of neo-conservatism on the shape and practice of contemporary American democracy. While there is an unmistakable element of lament in *Vineland's* approach, there is also a recognizable attempt to affirm, against the skepticism and disillusionment for which Pynchon is well-known, a hopeful vision of the future implicit in the promise of American liberal democratic ideals. Pynchon represents both the infirmity and the resiliency of the democratic aspirations of reform politics in America, traversing the thematic territory between justice as a foundational liberal principle and the experience of injustice in postwar American life. Making a case for the presence of a pragmatic Emersonianism in *Vineland*, I argue that Pynchon's novel takes seriously the possibility of a renewed progressive and populist spirit in American political thought and practice as a response to the dispirited and enervated state of the political left in contemporary America.

Philip Roth's fictional exploration of the tensions between the political and social realities of postwar America and the mythic elements of American identity in his "American trilogy" is the subject of Chapter Four. In *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*, Roth reflects on the ambivalent nature of the American ideal of self-invention, offering three narratives in which the ever present antagonism between the liberal promise of individualism and the demands visited on the individual by social and political forces and the

contingencies of history surface to leave its mark both on the lives of his protagonists and on the larger story of postwar America. By working self-consciously within the framework of American Adamic mythology in *American Pastoral*, Roth draws on archetypal and literary conventions to help dramatize both the tragic elements of recent American history, particularly in regard to the Vietnam war, and the potent sense of possibility which the myth of the Adamic individual continues to offer the American democratic imagination. Roth pursues this thematic thread back through the McCarthy era in *I Married a Communist* and into the period of the impeachment crisis which plagued the presidency of Bill Clinton in *The Human Stain*, offering a perspective on those moments in postwar America when the often-strained seams binding the liberal narrative of individual possibility to the unfolding tale of the American experience seem to be most tested. Throughout, Roth maintains an awareness of both the vitalizing role that individualism plays in the idea and the ideology of America and the illusory nature of such idealism, of the collision between his characters' visions of American freedom, innocence, and self-reliance and the contingencies and limitations imposed on their individual fates by the historical failures and unresolved issues regarding race and inequality that continue to impede the realization of the promise of American liberal democracy.

Martha Nussbaum, in her book *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, makes a case for what she sees as the importance of the literary imagination in the overall dynamic of political discussion in America, a position which grows out of the conviction, most eloquently articulated, Nussbaum argues, in the work of Walt Whitman, that "storytelling and literary imagining are not

opposed to rational argument, but can provide essential ingredients to rational argument” (Nussbaum xiii). The approach adopted in what follows takes Nussbaum’s assertion quite straightforwardly, regarding the polemical tendencies, ideological sympathies, and moralistic elements of the works under consideration as an invigorating ingredient of both the American novel and of many fundamental debates in American political life. Aside from the prominent place which each holds in contemporary American fiction, what specifically recommends Mailer, Roth, Pynchon, and DeLillo for this study is the trenchant manner in which the force of their literary imagination engages with the kinds of fundamental moral and political matters which are directly relevant to the discussions and debates which surround the notion of liberal democracy in contemporary America.

The novelists discussed here have all produced fiction that productively participates in political argument in a broad sense, engaging themes and fashioning narratives that actively employ political ideas and perspectives as essential elements of their fictional projects. This is not, of course, a characteristic that is exclusive to these four writers in postwar America. The same can be said of the work of novelists ranging from Gore Vidal, Joan Didion, and John Edgar Wideman to Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Kathy Acker, amongst others. It is the combination of this political sensibility and the range of postwar historical, intellectual, and political developments with which these novelists have concerned themselves in their work that has prompted their inclusion here. All four of these novelists have produced narratives that attempt to address the historical breadth of the postwar period in America, raising issues, substantive and theoretical, which often draw on and contribute to ongoing political and cultural “arguments”

regarding the significant events and developments which have left their mark on both the idea and the practice of American liberal democracy. In this regard, these writers offer exemplary opportunities to gauge the complexity, insightfulness and persuasiveness with which the postwar American novel continues to contribute to that discussion, both by considering the reflections on the state of American liberal democracy offered in their work, and by demonstrating the extent of the literary, political, and moral investment of their fiction in keeping faith with the both idea and the practice of liberalism and democracy in America.



## CHAPTER ONE

### **The Ascension of Technocorporatism and the Crisis of Liberal Democratic Citizenship in Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Armies of the Night***

Not since the debates between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists which preceded the ratification of the American constitution, and which produced such foundational liberal democratic documents as *The Federalist Papers* and John Adams's *A Defense of the Constitution of the Government of the United States of America*, has the citizen as a site of tension between the demands of liberal individualism and democratic principles so dominated the discourse of political theory in America. The liberal-communitarian debate that has influenced so much of Anglo-American political theory for the better part of two decades<sup>2</sup> now has succeeded in foregrounding many issues, ranging from the political to the epistemological, that are sources of conflict within any conception of citizenship which hopes to bridge the philosophic divide between liberalism and democracy. Postmodernism too, with its complex and varied attacks on "liberal subjectivity," has sought to rupture the liberal democratic construction of citizenship into its constituent parts in order to make apparent the "technologies of the subject" that contemporary late-capitalist society has inherited from the Enlightenment. And, of course, there is the crisis of political identity and community that face citizens of America as a consequence of the collapse of Communism and the end of the cold war. All of these challenges serve to highlight the most elemental of tensions within liberal democracy, the difficulties that always surround "the nature of the

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<sup>2</sup> It is generally agreed that the liberal-communitarian debate began in earnest with the publication of Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* in response to John Rawls' influential *A Theory of Justice*.

individual and his [/her] role in the polity” (Pennock, 2). Such discourse constitutes what Ronald Beiner has usefully called the liberal democratic “problem of citizenship” (Beiner 3).

Of course, as relevant and philosophically significant as Beiner’s “problem of citizenship” is, in contemporary America one cannot hope to adequately approach questions surrounding the relationship between the individual and the polity without recognizing the influence of a crucial third player in the dynamic of citizenship—the state. For all of the epistemological and theoretical questions concerning the metaphysical girding of the liberal democratic notion of citizenship, confronting the meaning and praxis of the state—the organization and institutionalization of political power—means facing up to what Robert J. Pranger and Danilo Zolo have identified as “the eclipse of citizenship” in contemporary America (Pranger, Zolo 152). As Alan Wolfe has pointed out, the state, as both a concept and as a theoretical reference point, has suffered some neglect in contemporary American political discourse, despite the “continued centrality of organized political power in modern societies” (Wolfe ix). In fact for political theorists such as Sheldon Wolin and George Armstrong Kelly<sup>3</sup> it is the growth and mobilization of state power beyond the legitimating boundaries of democratic political practice that have made “conceptions of democracy, and especially of the democratic citizen, anachronistic” (Wolin, *Essay* 184). Such political thinkers argue that the central culprit of the “crisis of citizenship” in contemporary America is not an inadequate theory of citizenship, nor an inability for political institutions

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<sup>3</sup>“Today’s problematic nature of citizenship (in the democracies, and especially the United States) is in part linked to the demise of the concept of the state in the twentieth century, the very time when the powers of the empirical state were growing inordinately” (Kelly 79).

to liberate themselves from the Enlightenment conception of the autonomous subject, but rather the undemocratic nature of the state and its growing imperviousness to legitimate democratic praxis and politics.

It is then this complex triangular relationship between the individual, the polity, and the state, that marks the theoretical and political ground on which the nature, and in fact validity, of contemporary liberal democratic citizenship in America is contested. The “explosion of interest in the concept of citizenship among political theorists [...] [and] among thinkers on all points of the political spectrum” has not necessarily been mirrored across the whole range of the American novel, but it is certainly the case that many of the issues and themes prominent in the work of Norman Mailer can be said to traverse this disputed territory (Kymlicka and Norman 283).

Since 1948, the work of Norman Mailer has offered such unique and compelling commentary on the defining developments of contemporary American social and political life that, as Christopher Hitchens writes, “the politics of Norman Mailer have conventionally been evaluated more as a personal register of the American zeitgeist, and less as owing any debt or duty to ideology” (115). And yet Mailer has, at least since his infamous speech at the Waldorf peace conference in 1949<sup>4</sup>, made his own political development a significant, and often very public, focal point of his career as a writer. Despite an ideological odyssey that has seen Mailer don political figurations ranging from Marxist<sup>5</sup> to Trotskyite

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<sup>4</sup> See Manso 134-35

<sup>5</sup> Referring to Mailer’s Waldorf peace conference speech Irving Howe is reported by Peter Manso as saying: “The speech was pure left-wing sectarianism, the line that both sides are no good and moving towards an increasing concentration of state power. God knows what being a committed Marxist means, but I don’t think Norman ever qualified in any doctrinal sense” (Manso 135).

to his most considered and mature position, in which he describes himself as a “left conservative,” Mailer has consistently, again borrowing Hitchens’ terms, “retained a certain idea of the Left.” Despite his flirtations with more radical political ideas, Mailer has, since the time of his first novel, shown a strong and passionate sympathy for the principal concerns of American liberal democratic citizenship<sup>6</sup>, a sympathy that has shaped his political dissidence and helped to define the thematic concerns of his fiction. As Mailer himself has recently commented, upon re-reading the bulk of his body of work while preparing a collection to commemorate the fifty-year anniversary of the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*,

One theme came to predominate—it was apparent that most of my writing was about America. How much I loved my country—that was evident—and how much I didn’t love it at all! Our noble idea of democracy was forever being traduced, sullied, exploited, and downgraded [...] So, yes, the question was alive—would greed and the hegemony of the mediocre [...] triumph over democracy? (Mailer *Time*, I)

Mailer’s commitment to what is really a rather traditional liberal democratic idea of America—an America that pursues democratic ideals and resists the forces of mediocrity—cohabitates in Mailer’s writing with his struggle to understand his country existentially, which for him usually means in terms of power and self-creation.

“Existential” is a term that Mailer employs often and widely in his essays and in interviews. Impossible to define exactly, the term implies, for Mailer, more of an attitude than a philosophy. This attitude is best described as the aura which

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<sup>6</sup> Mailer’s great friend, the Marxist philosopher and novelist Jean Malaquais, has described Mailer’s political philosophy as thinking “in terms of God, Liberty, and the Constitution” (Mills, 97).

surrounds a personality with the courage and vitality to confront the power of the will, which means for Mailer, to recognize the freedom inherent in existence and exercise it through action, risk, and constant self-creation. That a nation can possess such an attitude, and express a personality capable of exercising existential freedom in this manner, is a belief that radiates in all of Mailer's musings on American politics. For Mailer, the ideal of America is not based on anything absolute or unchangeable, but rather is in a constant state of becoming; liberty and democracy combine to form a kind of existential politics that, as far as Mailer is concerned, constitutes the closest thing to an essence that America possesses.

This existential view of America compels Mailer to seek out the alienating elements in its social and political life. What, in America, destroys both the individual imagination and the sense of collective free will that are so central to its continued self-creation? It is a question that, for Mailer, gets to the heart of what is threatening both the possibility and the praxis of liberal democratic citizenship in contemporary America. Mailer's answer in work after work is the totalitarianism of technology and the values of the corporation. As he demonstrates early on in his career in *The Naked and the Dead*, the old battle between conservatism and liberalism, between the right and the left, which has traditionally animated American politics, is dying. In the wake of this, for Mailer, America has become "corporation-land," and much of what could be called political in his work, most substantially demonstrated in his novel about the 1968 protest march on the Pentagon *The Armies of the Night*, is devoted to resisting the apolitical and anti-democratic challenges which this poses to the health of America's political life.

“The shits are killing us”: The Ascension of the Technocrat and the  
Corporatist Challenge to Liberal Democracy in Norman Mailer’s *The Naked  
and the Dead*

“As the years go by and I become a little more possible for  
Ph.D. mills, graduate students will begin to write about the slapping  
of my creative rage, of Mailer’s vision of his rage as his shield,  
when what I was trying to say was simply. ‘The shits are killing  
us.’”

--Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself*

In his essay on totalitarianism found in *The Presidential Papers*, Norman Mailer asserts that, “totalitarianism is better understood if it is regarded as a plague rather than examined as a style of ideology” (175). The persuasion of totalitarianism that most concerns Mailer is specifically American; it is not the totalitarianism which comes attached to Fascism or Bolshevism with their penchant for absolute dictatorship and authoritarian oppression—modern American totalitarianism is not an employer of the hob-nailed boot or the internment camp. For Mailer, the term totalitarian is most usefully affixed to a psychology rather than an ideology, or rather to a particular disease of the American mind, a contamination of the American collective consciousness by the growing ubiquity of technocratic modes of thought and politics.

Of course, the dangers surrounding the development of “mass politics” was a central issue for many American intellectuals and critics writing in the postwar era. Mailer shared the growing wariness—expressed in the work of, amongst others, David Riesman, Lionel Trilling, Richard Hofstadter and William Whyte Jr.—of the insidious social, cultural and political ramifications of the expanding forces of conformity, corporate life, and bureaucratization in America. This is not

to suggest, however, that Mailer's work does little more than add another voice to the chorus of postwar intellectuals decrying the "age of conformity" and issuing grave warnings regarding the emergence of "mass politics" and "mass man." Undoubtedly the specter of totalitarianism had a major impact on the path that liberalism, and therefore American politics, would travel in postwar America, and Mailer's work offers a compelling and often insightful perspective on the nature of what Thomas Hill Schaub has called "the story of chastened liberalism," or the postwar "liberal narrative" in America (Schaub viii).

According to many commentators, including such eminent historians of American liberalism as Alan Brinkley and James P. Young, it was the growing fears regarding the totalitarian threat to America that compelled liberals in the postwar era to adopt a much more cautious and pragmatic approach to political matters. Reacting to the horrors of World War II, the onset of cold war tensions with the Soviet Union, and the growing concern over the Communist threat at home, American liberals drifted toward the skeptical approach propounded by figures such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Reinhold Niebuhr who, as a response to the distressing experiences of the mid-twentieth century, called for a "critique of the traditional bases of faith in liberal democracy" (Schlesinger, *Vital Center* Forward). The result of this growing skepticism, the preoccupation with totalitarian ideologies, and the loss of faith in the relevance of liberal ideals to the postwar world, was the emergence of the anti-ideological politics of the 1940s and the 1950s.

Using Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia as illustrations of the potential dangers of popular political movements, a number of American social scientists in



the late 1940s and 1950s began to push for liberal democracy to be understood, not in terms of ideals or social visions—appeals to which, they argued, had been shown to lead to extremism—but rather as a functional idea, or as Martin Lipset would later put it, “the good society itself in operation”(Lipset 439). The notion that ideology itself is totalitarian in nature reinforced the growing sense of trepidation amongst liberals regarding the popular control of political life. By asserting the fundamental triumph of liberal capitalism and democratic institutions over fascism and socialism, “the end of ideology”<sup>7</sup> was a theoretical position that greatly appealed to liberals content with America’s growing prosperity, and nervous about any radical or divisive political ideas that might suggest a less than unwavering rejection of totalitarian politics on the part of American liberalism. As historian Richard H Pells puts it, “by the end of the 1940s, their [American liberal intellectual’s] minds and their essays were filled less with the dream of a social democracy than with the harrowing imagery of totalitarianism,” largely of course, by this period, associated with the communist threat (83).

As the chastened liberalism of postwar America quickly adapted to the emerging orthodoxies of the cold war political and intellectual consensus, Mailer’s work of the period, most prominently for our purposes *The Naked and the Dead*, expresses the suspicion that the postwar disparagement of ideology, and its appeal to replace traditional political ideological conflict with an instrumental/technological approach to the advancement of social and political change, was not a reflection of a strong attitude towards totalitarian encroachment,

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<sup>7</sup> “The end of ideology” is a theory generally associated with social scientists such as Edward Shils, Raymond Aron, Seymour Martin Lipset, and perhaps most particularly with Daniel Bell, whose book *The End of Ideology: The Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* arguably contains its most sophisticated development.



but rather a symptom of the already expansive presence of totalitarian tendencies in the American psyche.

By moving the discussion of totalitarianism from an ideological to a pathological emphasis, Mailer advances what is perhaps his most telling and salient point on the matter—that, as it has manifested itself in America after WW II, totalitarianism has developed in a largely trans-political manner. He writes:

Totalitarianism has slipped into America with no specific political face. There are liberals who are totalitarian, and conservatives, radicals, rightists, fanatics, hordes of the well-adjusted. Totalitarianism has come to America with no concentration camps and no need for them, no political parties and no desire for new parties, no totalitarianism has slipped into the body cells and psyche of each of us. (*Presidential Papers* 184)

In America, for Mailer, totalitarianism functions as a kind of antipolitics, a “shapeless force” and “obdurate emptiness” at the heart of American political culture whose expansion spells, not so much the end of politics in America, as its stagnation, its descent into technological and corporate stasis. The hope advanced by those who looked forward to the “end of ideology,” that political conflict could be limited to experts debating technical, analytical, or scientific questions, looked to Mailer not like the “end of ideology” at all, but more like a new kind of ideology, an apolitical ideology that posed a direct challenge to American liberal democracy.

Though it is to the political and social manifestations of this “post-ideological core ideology,” or “instrumental antipolitics” that Mailer applies the term totalitarian—a term perhaps chosen as much for its impact as its justness—as he develops and clarifies his political perspective the designation “technocorporatist,” or so I will argue, seems to acquire an increasing

appropriateness (Schedler 1, 12)<sup>8</sup>. In fact, in an interview with Christopher Hitchens, published in the “New Left Review” in 1997, Mailer goes some way towards embracing the term, suggesting that resisting corporatism’s growing ideological presence in America is a matter central to his self-described political position as a “left conservative.” Asked to elaborate on just what he means by “left conservative,” Mailer answers:

You can define it by saying what you’re against. You know, on the one hand, I’d say that I’m against corporations. I think corporations have done as much damage to the world, or certainly will by the time they are finished, as the communists ever did to the intelligence of Russians. That, in fact, corporatism and Stalinism have many more similarities than differences. (Hitchens 117)

It may appear, upon first glance at such a statement, that by “corporatism” Mailer is simply referring to the immense influence and power wielded in contemporary America by large economic interests. Indeed “big business” is a ubiquitous villain in Mailer’s work, but a fuller appreciation of the breath of political insight that surrounds his use of the term can only be achieved through close attention to the range of political concerns that inhabit his writing, and especially to the political themes that he consistently returns to and develops in his fiction. Mailer’s use of political terminology may often appear somewhat cavalier, and accusations of irresponsibility and ideological incoherence are not unheard of, but it is quite clear from the shrewd nature of his language that Mailer often uses political terminology

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<sup>8</sup> Marxist critic Richard Godden demonstrates the usefulness of the notion of corporatism for reading Mailer’s work in *Fictions of Capital: The American Novel From James to Mailer*. While Godden is more concerned with corporatism as an element of the evolution of Fordism (“that regime of capital where centralized and hierarchic structures are developed to manage the processes not only of production but also of purchase”), and not its role in the concerns regarding the crisis of liberal democratic citizenship in contemporary America, his lively “close-reading” of *The Armies of the Night* as “Mailer’s struggle to locate a voice of resistance to the corporatist state” provides a significant resource for, and challenge to, my attempt to locate Mailer’s “theory of citizenship” within a liberal democratic framework (Godden 3-4; 11).

with a conspicuous understanding of its inescapable complexity as well as its impact.

The term corporatism, as is the case with much distinctly political terminology, lives a hotly disputed existence. Narrowly, corporatism can be defined as a political relationship that exists between special interest groups and the state, arrangements which seek to bypass the legitimate rights and institutions of citizen-based democracy to promote policies and agendas based on the needs and desires of a particular corporate or associational interest, rather than on any notion of the broader public good. Corporatism is a kind of interest intermediation, a manner of governing which substitutes “para-parliamentary, as well as para-bureaucratic forms of decision making” for formal democratic processes, and which does not seek to govern by democratic consensus but rather determines state policy based on “a consensus resulting from informal, highly inaccessible negotiations among poorly legitimized representatives of functional groups” (Offe 167). In short, it is any political shift away from the primacy of the participation of the individual citizen in a democracy towards the primacy of associations or organizations and their power to influence state decisions without electoral approval, mandate or legitimacy.

Corporatism, as John Ralston Saul proposes, is a term that, “better than any other [...] describes the organization of modern society” (*Doubter’s Companion* 74). Likewise, Mailer’s interest in corporatism stretches well beyond its legitimacy as a theory, or even practice, of state and bureaucratic structuring. When Mailer describes contemporary America as “corporation-land” he is calling attention, not only to the social and cultural dominance of corporate capitalism and

its powerful institutions, but also to what is a primary component of a growing social and political methodology that he believes is fundamentally transforming, not just America's political landscape, but its psychological and epistemological landscapes as well. Mailer recognizes, in contemporary American political culture, a tendency to reduce democratic politics to a system for mediating between powerful organizational interests and the demands and imperatives of an increasingly technocratic worldview amongst those elites and experts with power and influence over the public policy-making process. In the *Presidential Papers* Mailer refers to this organizational and ideological challenge to liberal democratic principles as "a plague" and as "the insert[ion] into each of us [...] of corporate techniques" (184); in *Of a Fire on the Moon* he calls it "the psychology of machines" (155); and in *The Armies of the Night* "the walking American lobotomy" (102).

What Mailer is dramatizing, as he endeavors to articulate the expanding influence and efficiency of the administrative and technological organization of America in his work, is the tension which necessarily exists between the growing centrality of the technocratic worldview—marked by the evolution of a technocorporatist state—and the possibility of a legitimate democracy and a vital citizenry in America. Calling attention to the defining precept of this emerging worldview—the technocorporatist animosity towards politics—Mailer's first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, illustrates this fundamental shift in American political culture via a narrative that revolves around the tellingly impotent ideological conflict between the "fascist" General Cummings and the "liberal" Lt. Hearn.

Most critics of the novel recognize the political allegory at work between Cummings and Hearn, reading the narrative as Mailer's recognition of the death of liberalism and the growing influence of totalitarianism in America. Jean Radford argues that one of the chief ironies underlying this conflict is that Cummings and Hearn "are both officers involved in fighting a war against fascism with a military instrument which is itself fascistic in organization, structure, and ideology" (44). It seems that on this one point—that the army is fascistic—Cummings and Hearn agree, though certainly with greatly differing degrees of approval. Radford explains that Mailer's portrayal of the army here is part of a larger challenge in the novel to "expedient fascism," that is, to the notion that the totalitarian exercise of power within certain organizations, such as the military or large corporations, can be justified on the grounds that it maximizes efficiency and productivity. Radford especially notes Mailer's distaste for the political hypocrisy that this matter seems to expose in the American war effort, and which seems characteristic of both military men such as Cummings and progressive thinkers such as Hearn.

On a certain level this may be the case. Mailer is assuredly not enamored of the strict hierarchical structure and undemocratic nature of the military. Also, undoubtedly, scenes such as the one in which Lt. Hearn protests the privilege accorded the officers of receiving an unfair and unequal portion of meat, while the enlisted men are left without, are meant to correspond ironically with the tales of racism, poverty, and social inequality in American civilian life, which Mailer unfolds by way of his "Time Machine" literary device. However, it is just as obvious that what Mailer provides in *The Naked and the Dead* is not just a depiction of WW II America, but also a forward looking political perspective that,

while certainly critical of the army and its officers, views the hypocrisy and fascist mentality of American institutions like the military as antiquated, as the last vestiges of an ideology that, by the time of the war in the Pacific, was anachronistic, and whose transformation into more sophisticated and subtle forms of totalitarianism was ultimately greatly facilitated by the war. While *The Naked and the Dead* is most generally regarded as Mailer's novel about WW II, and specifically about America's war in the Pacific—the fictional product of Mailer's experiences as an army private serving during the conflict—the political roots of the novel are firmly planted in the postwar world<sup>9</sup>, and in Mailer's evolving perceptions concerning the diminishment and atrophy of liberal democratic politics in early cold war America.

For General Cummings, the army constitutes a testing ground for his fascist social theories. When Cummings asserts that one could “consider the army... as a preview of the future,” the irony lies not in the potential for the victor to assume the fascist nature of the defeated, but rather in Cummings' failure to perceive that changes already afoot in both American society and the army itself, as the war draws to a close, have rendered his fascist ideals politically anachronistic and socially irrelevant.

Cummings' fascism is of the heroic variety, full of glorifications of the will and grandiose theories of power. Ideologically it is rooted in a particular understanding of history and the purposes of conflict. In one distinctly

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<sup>9</sup> As Eric Homberger has pointed out this makes Mailer's novel typical of other American 'war novels' of the late 1940's: "It is well-known that most of the war novels in America were written after the war. It is a less familiar point that war novels, especially those which appeared soon after the war, were often the vehicle for political and social tensions which found expression in the first Cold War presidential election" (32).

metaphysical passage Cummings associates his firm belief in the inevitability of fascism with a larger historical process:

I like to call it a process of historical energy. There are countries which have latent powers, latent resources, they are full of potential energy, so to speak. And there are great concepts which can unlock that, express it. As kinetic energy a country is organization, co-ordinated effort, your [Hearn's] epithet fascism.... Historically the purpose of this war is to translate America's potential into kinetic energy. (280)

All of the metaphysical trappings aside, the gist of what the General says here has some validity in respect to postwar America. Indeed the process of state planning and the coordination of governmental, economic, and military organizations which the Roosevelt administration had made a central component of its wartime mobilization policy, provided a kind of model for the corporatization and militarization of American political policy that defined the early cold war period, and that found ultimate expression in the Truman Doctrine of 1947 and the development of the National Security State paradigm. Cummings' reference to a "great concept" which can unlock the "potential energy" of America is undoubtedly an allusion to the growing understanding among elites of "the reciprocal relationship which seemed to exist between prosperity and armaments," and the potential that a national security based political agenda held for bringing about the de-politicization of public decision making in America (Sherry 136).

It is, however, Cummings' great miscalculation that the dual forces of militarization and organization, as they worked their way to the center of postwar American political culture, would bring about an age dominated by the political Right, by those who wanted a consolidation of power amongst elites. As Mailer writes:



There was the thing Cummings had never said, but it was implied tacitly in all his arguments. History was in the grasp of the Right, and after the war their political campaigns would be intense. One big push, one big offensive, and history was theirs for this century, perhaps the next one. The League of Omnipotent Men. [...] It could be narrowed probably to a dozen, two dozen men, not even in communication with each other, not even all on the same level of awareness. (*Naked* 342)

Of course it was clear by 1948, the year that saw both the first cold war Presidential election in America as well as the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*, that it would not be a dozen or two men that would control the power structure in postwar America. Rather, what began to develop was a very complex and diverse system of interrelationships between interests, organizations, and the state, buttressed by a unifying ideology—"the ideology of national preparedness, and the state's dependence on war and defense for its role in national life" (Sherry 142). That the cultivation and propagation of this cold war ideology should not be understood as a harbinger for the emergence of some new American fascism, but rather as a catalyst for the expansion of corporatism and the ascendancy of the technocratic worldview in postwar America, is a perspective central to Mailer's political allegory in *The Naked and the Dead*.

By including Cummings' fascist theories as a central component of the novel, Mailer achieves something much subtler than a warning about a nascent American fascism, or a fictional personification of the fascist tendencies of the American military mentality. There is an air of elegy surrounding Mailer's depiction of Cummings and his metaphysics. Certainly he is every bit the "monster" as Hearn describes him, but he is also engaging, charismatic, and willing to appeal to the imagination. There is, as Mailer might put it, something of



the existential in Cummings—a distrust of the purely rational and a certain flare for the dramatic and the tragic. At the heart of Cummings' personality, though not his ideology, is an enemy that Mailer can respect, a worthy adversary for those who believe that to struggle with the devil is an existential act. For Mailer, Cummings espouses the kind of ideas, and represents the kind of political challenge, that has the potential to reveal "being," to force a man to explore his soul, and a country to discover its meaning. In many respects *The Naked and the Dead* is, at least in part, a lament for a vital style of politics that is now past, and a nostalgic acknowledgement, by a determined leftist, of an often engaging, but now passé, enemy.

Cummings' ideas, though thoroughly fascistic and reprehensible, pose for Mailer, less of a threat to America's liberal democratic principles in the postwar world than the "plague totalitarianism" of the corporation and of the technocrat. Cummings' brand of fascism belongs to what Mailer has called "that first huge wave of totalitarianism" which swept the Nazis into power and the world into war (Mailer, *Presidential Papers* 182). This species of totalitarianism has been thoroughly defeated and discredited by the forces of liberalism. However, as Mailer points out, one of the truly haunting things about totalitarianism in the twentieth century is the difficulty "of rebels to find a field of war where it could be given battle" (182). Democracy, as Mailer conceives of it, is the institutional, metaphysical, and epistemological framework on which a society assures the presence of a political battlefield, a political arena where opposing ideas can meet, and where the result of the fray is not predetermined. Totalitarianism, as Mailer sees it evolving in the postwar world, seeks to supplant the need for that

metaphoric battlefield with a worldview that promotes the priority of security, efficiency, and organization over democratic processes and principles.

Michael Glenday is correct to point out the problems inherent in identifying Cummings and Sgt Croft, the other “fascist” in the novel, with the kind of totalitarianism in which Mailer is interested:

Readers are right to see the novel as an extensive political allegory through which Mailer dramatizes for the first time in fiction his enduring belief that America is being destroyed by totalitarianism. The difficulties arise when we begin to consider Mailer’s characters and the extent to which they embody this political vision. Cummings, Croft and Hearn have often been cast as the main players in an ideological war [...] The problem with this interpretation, as some critics have seen, is that by its logic Cummings and Croft ought to emerge as victors [...] The flaw in such a reading lies in its assumption that Cummings and Croft simplistically embody the machine mentality of totalitarianism. (Glenday 39)

Glenday goes on to argue that it is Mailer’s preoccupation with the violent nature of Cummings and Croft that underlies the ideological ambiguity of Mailer’s allegory, pointing to comments made by Mailer in *The Presidential Papers* as his “confession” to harboring a “secret admiration” for characters like Sam Croft, read fascists. As Glenday quotes it the passage reads, “behind [sic] the ideology in *The Naked and the Dead* was an obsession with violence. The characters for whom I had the most secret admiration, like Croft, were violent people...he yet possesses certain qualities which make him an enemy, rather than a servant to a totalitarian system” (as quoted in Glenday 39).

Mailer’s comments here seek to further define his conception of totalitarianism in its technocorporatist guise by distinguishing between two conceptions of violence. Violence, as Mailer would have it, when it is expressed

as an aspect of character, as a quality of an individual will, can be admired to this extent—that it represents the possibility of resistance and affirms the capacity of the individual to act existentially despite the hegemony of a particular ideology, system, or worldview. As he goes on to say in *The Presidential Papers* “what I still disapprove of is *inhuman* violence—violence which is on a large scale and abstract” (136). Violence, as an extension of a methodology, or as an expression of an organizational, systemic, or technological imperative, represents, for Mailer, nothing more than the obliteration of dissent, difference, and possibility, and thus should be understood as totalitarian. The appearance of ideological incoherence, and Mailer’s seeming equivocation on the subject of violence, can be viewed as a reflection of Mailer’s unwillingness to limit the existential and political scope of individual dissent, part of the development of Mailer’s larger political perspective, and opposition to technocorporatism.

The significance of Cummings, to the technocorporatist future that Mailer envisions, is finally his insignificance. In one discussion with Cummings, Hearn remarks that “We’re moving toward greater organization, and I don’t see how the left can win that battle in America” (280). Hearn, the single significant liberal presence in the novel, is resigned to the fact that post-WW II American politics will be dominated, not by ideological struggles between left and right, but by the struggle for control of growing and increasingly powerful bureaucratic and state systems and extra-governmental associations. Likewise, as the novel draws to a close, General Cummings is left pondering his actual efficacy and importance as a commander of forces and struggling to come to terms with the knowledge that the ultimate victory of his campaign was less the result of his personal will and skill as

a soldier then the result of “a casual net of factors too large, too vague, for him to comprehend” (622). Explicit in the denouement of the novel, and Cummings’ confrontation with his own inconsequence, is Mailer’s recognition that the real threat to democracy and existential self-determination in postwar America will not come from fascism, but from America’s increasing corporatization, and from the power wielded by that particular ideology’s devoted disciple—the technocrat. In *The Naked and the Dead* it is Major Dalleson who most definitively exemplifies this role.

Major Dalleson, the red-faced, thin-lipped mediocre bureaucrat whose “only desire was to be promoted to captain, permanent grade,” manages in the closing pages of the novel, to steal General Cummings’ glorious climax (Mailer 571). Through a combination of luck and benign opportunism, Dalleson finds himself in command of the successful invasion of Botoi Bay which “in the official history of the campaign sent to Army [...] was given as the main reason for breaking through the Toyaku Line” and consequently the final occupation by the American army of the island of Anopepei (571). It is this final turn of events, layered with irony and allegorical significance, which compels Cummings to finally accept that “it would be the hacks who would occupy history’s seat after the war” (623).

The future, Mailer seems to be suggesting, belongs to those like Dalleson, who appear to derive immense pleasure and satisfaction from their own instrumentality, who can accept as their greatest purpose their assigned role as part of a larger system which they neither control nor completely understand. The final image of the novel is of Dalleson sitting in his newly finished shack, going about

his administrative duties and paper work, and contemplating new techniques for his map-reading course with what Mailer describes as “a simple childish joy”—a parting glimpse perhaps of the new American guardian of power, the technocratic priest of the postwar corporatist configuration of America, going about his work (626). This is a more archetypal image than it might first appear, especially when one considers John Ralston Saul’s assertion that “the first technocrat was not produced by ENA or Sciences Po or Harvard. He marched out of the military school and his profession was that of staff officer” (*Voltaire’s Bastards* 179).

Equally as impotent in the face of the creeping spectre of the “new” totalitarian organization of America as Cummings’ naked fascism is Hearn’s dead liberalism. Many critics have addressed the issue of Hearn’s liberalism in the novel. Some, such as Robert Solotroff and Jennifer Bailey, read Hearn as ultimately a defeated liberal whose eventual death confirms that Mailer regards liberal ideology as ineffective and incapable of responding to a serious totalitarian threat. Others, perhaps most vigorously Nigel Leigh, interpret Hearn as a kind of martyred liberal, a figure of repression who struggles against his repressor, but is ultimately sacrificed in recognition of “the immediacy and potency of the potential domestic right-wing threat as perceived by Mailer” (Leigh 20). Joseph Wenke, on the other hand, accepts neither the Hearn as “defeated liberal,” nor the Hearn as “martyred liberal” thesis, arguing that the political allegory of the narrative works against both explanations:

What remains problematic about *The Naked and the Dead* is not the symbolic significance of the decision to climb Mount Anaka but the fact that the novel rejects liberalism yet allows its protagonist to choose as his definitive expression of political protest an act that, in

terms not only of the political vocabulary of the book but also of the rhetoric of Mailer's entire career, is undoubtedly liberal. (39)

All of these readings seem content to interpret Hearn's, and arguably Mailer's, liberalism exclusively in relation to Cumming's right wing ideology, thereby designating the boundaries within which liberalism can be defined, and identifying it solely in terms of its ethical and political resistance to fascism.

Certainly if one accepts the philosophical and political restraints of this understanding of liberalism, then Wenke is correct to see Hearn's fate as problematic in terms of a novel that he asserts "rejects liberalism". Significantly, Wenke does not base this view on Mailer's sketch of Hearn as an ineffectual and bourgeois liberal whose leftist inclinations only find expression in the abstract and often platitudinous defenses of the liberal worldview he offers Cummings. On its own, Mailer's characterization of Hearn does not constitute the novel's negation of liberalism. It is the scene in which Hearn, put in command of a platoon, begins to question his own motives and as a result recognizes the loose moral footing on which his liberal positions are founded, that Wenke points to as the site in the novel which manifestly expresses Mailer's exasperation and loss of confidence in liberalism as a tenable political position. Wenke concludes from this incident that Hearn's "recognition of moral ambiguity represents a movement away from liberalism to the kind of 'moral radicalism' implicit in Mailer's existential ethic" (39).

Hearn's personal confrontation with his own desire for power, and his coming to terms with the knowledge that "when he searches himself he was just another Croft," is indeed a significant aspect of the novel's probing of the social

and moral foundations of liberalism (Mailer, *Naked* 503). Hearn, like most liberals of his era, defined the liberal battle with fascism as much in moral terms, as political or military ones. His identification with the liberal cause, and with liberalism in general, while expressed as a kind of unclear but sympathetic humanism, and a rather abstract sense of the desirability of justice and equality, found its most substantial roots in liberalism's opposition to the amorality of fascism. If Cummings had his metaphysics and grandiose theories of history, then Hearn countered with the moral certainty that comes with supporting the more just and right side of a profound conflict.

It is, however, a political world lacking the moral certainty that liberalism's conflict with fascism underwrote, which confronts liberalism in postwar America. This, rather than postwar liberalism's capacity to meet the challenge of a renewed fascism, seems to be the issue Mailer is exploring via Hearn. In other words, Hearn's fate is less a reflection of Mailer's concern with liberalism's ability to resist the ideological and political forces of fascism in the postwar world, or of his outright rejection of liberalism, than it is an expression of Mailer's growing unease surrounding the postwar evolution of American liberalism set adrift without the moral compass of its antifascism, and saddled with its apparent vulnerability to totalitarian psychology. The experiences of depression and war had left postwar liberalism struggling for an identity and unsure of its connection to the moral and political complexities confronting the individual in postwar America. Unlike James Gould Cozzen's character Jim Edsell in *Guard of Honor*, whose professed liberalism proves patently false, and Saul Bellow's character Joseph in *Dangling Man*, whose commitment to individualism is left in shards by the existential trial



of waiting to go off to war, Hearn retains at least some semblance of liberal faith, even if it is only his distaste for capitulation, the sense that “for whatever reason you had to keep resisting” (508).

Hearn, then, dies neither defeated nor martyred, but rather duped. He is, finally, unable to recognize that the real dilemma of his situation, beyond the philosophical wrestling match between his liberal convictions and the fascist side of his personality, lay in his inability to take action based on what Frederic Jameson has called “an existential choice of solidarity”—an imperfect, partly irrational, and morally specific decision to take the side of the unempowered, the nonsystemic, and the vulnerable (*Seeds of Time* 44). By continuing to assess his situation via the ethicopolitical prism of the fascism versus liberalism model, Hearn becomes mired in a kind of antiquated liberal universalism that renders him incapable of fully appreciating the complexity of the power structure confronting him, or of his uncertain relationship to it as an individual. Thus vulnerable, and alienated from the political primacy of an existentially determined liberal commitment, Hearn falls prey to Croft’s Machiavellian manipulations, and is killed.

It is Cummings, perhaps not surprisingly, who finally comes to the realization that power in postwar America seems to have developed beyond the scope of the traditional ideologies of left and right, and that, as he succinctly puts it, “the route to control could best masquerade under a conservative liberalism” (624). “The reactionaries and isolationists,” he reasons, “would miss the bell, cause almost as much annoyance as they were worth” (624). Perhaps, Cummings finally resolves, “he might be smarter to take a fling at the State Department”



(623). This is, of course, a thinly disguised reference to the ideological development of cold war liberalism and the transformations in American politics that accompanied the postwar preoccupation with security and international questions that defined the national security state. It is largely understandable in the context of the pressing political concerns of the late 1940's in America—mainly the issues surrounding the impending presidential election of 1948. However, there is also, albeit in a nascent form, a hint of what will become an overriding political theme of much of Mailer's work—that what lies beyond the old oppositions of left and right is not the “end of ideology,” but rather the paralysis of politics, the abandonment of the existential experience of the political for an instrumentalism that breeds the sterile political imagination of the bureaucratic, the corporate, and the technocratic society.

“So political and so primitive”: Citizenship, Political Action, and the Vitality of American Liberal Democracy in *The Armies of the Night*

“Political democracy, as it exists and practically works in America, with all of its threatening evils, supplies a training-school for making first-class men. It is life's gymnasium, not of good only, but of all. We try often, though we fall back often [...] Whatever we do not attain, we at any rate attain the experience of the fight, the hardening of the strong campaign, and throb with currents of attempt at least.

--Walt Whitman, *Preface*, 1855 in *Leaves of Grass*

By 1968 and the publication of *The Armies of the Night*, his novel/history of the events surrounding the previous year's anti-Vietnam war demonstration at the Pentagon, Mailer's efforts to come to grips with the state of democracy in postwar America, and his attempt to assess the depth to which technocorporatism

had contaminated the American political imagination, would find a new form and an updated historical context, but would tell its story with familiar villains. No longer couched in allegorical language, Mailer's skepticism regarding the viability of dissent and resistance in postwar America focuses, in *The Armies of the Night*, on one critical directive—to discover if, in fact, the possibility for the existential and the unpredictable in American life could somehow be rescued from the technocrats. The answer, for Mailer, rests primarily on the revitalization of liberal democratic citizenship in America, a recovery of a mode of political action able to free itself from what Mailer calls the “sound-as-a-brickwork-logic-of-the-next-step,” that is, the logic of the technocrat, and to rediscover the imaginative aspect of democracy and the existential value of dissidence, participation, and the idea of the revolutionary.

Indeed it is the idea of the revolutionary that takes centre stage as Mailer reveals a certain philosophical idealism in his approach to American politics; an idealism that emphasizes the tension between America's foundational democratic principles and its formal democratic practices. By backgrounding the various ideological vagaries of the period in question in favour of a more formal/conceptual approach, Mailer asserts an understanding of the priority of political principles in American political culture that gestures towards what Samuel Huntington has described as the “Ideals versus Institutions gap,” or the notion that “the widespread consensus on liberal-democratic values provides the basis for challenging the legitimacy of American political practices and the authority of American political institutions” (Huntington 32). “What seemed significant,” to Mailer, as he pondered the conceptual imperatives of the March,

“was the idea of a revolution which preceded ideology” (102). By asserting the idea of the revolutionary as a fundamental American political principle which precedes ideological disagreements, and thereby challenges the legitimacy of political institutions and practices which discourage or repress either its formal or experiential influence, Mailer invokes the spirit of the Jeffersonian democratic tradition and reminds us, as Judith Shklar has done in a somewhat different context, that “Jefferson wanted not merely new politics, but a politics of perpetual newness, as implicit in democratic principles” (Shklar 1998 174).

Technocorporatism, at its most fundamental level, seeks to exorcise the experience of the new from the political realm by reducing politics “to the technically oriented task of ‘keeping the machine running,’” thus confining the possible outcomes of democratic praxis within well-defined methodological boundaries. In other words, those in authority, as Mailer sees it, have a vested interest in the predictable, in being able to manage politics and political action to the point where the democratic legitimacy of political practice is compromised, and politics in America is transformed from an expression of the nation’s creativity and progressive energy, into a process which serves only to reinforce the logic of a prevailing methodology, a mere matter of ensuring continuity and stability. Such a worldview considers the idea of the revolutionary to be an antiquated notion that, like individual consciousness and citizenship, is viewed as an artifact of “an inappropriate and inferior decision-making system” (Fischer 16).

Under the thumb of the technocratic worldview, as Mailer depicts it, American politics has become the staunch enemy of imagination and a means towards the evisceration of the dialectical tensions which, for Mailer, are the

source of everything healthy and vibrant in American democracy. Deeply invested in Mailer's dialectical conception of democracy is his desire to revive the notion that, in America, democracy should always be understood as revolutionary in form if not necessarily in content. The political tension which exists in a dynamic democracy between the "new" and the "status quo"—or what Mailer has referred to as "the great and mortal debate between rebel and conservative" (*Cannibals and Christians* 165)—is a fundamental source of the kinds of ideas and energies which can create, challenge, and contest America's understanding of itself and its future. In an American context the revolutionary, as Mailer conceives it, can never be understood as the possible achievement or ultimate realization of specific ideological or political imperatives. Rather, as Richard Poirer points out:

The odd fact of the matter is that while Mailer is always advocating revolutions—of consciousness, of minorities, of sexual radicals—no successful revolution is possible within the terms set by him and none would be temperamentally acceptable to him. He does not want an accomplished revolution, assuming there even is such a thing. Rather he wants the intensification of the dialectical tensions that induce revolutionary fervour. (Poirer 107)

In fact, for Mailer, the invigorating presence of the revolutionary all but ensures the continuous play of opposing political perspectives that denies ultimate victory to either the forces of the "new" or of the "old," but rather maintains the purchase which both have on the American political consciousness.

Mailer's understanding of the idea of the revolutionary, and the role that it plays in his dialectical model of democracy, is not grounded in any foundational notion of historical progress, evolution, or transcendence, though he would certainly argue that it remains open to the possibility, though not the historical necessity, of all three. It is expressly Mailer's intention to root the crucial

oppositional movement of democracy, at least as he conceives it, in an existential, rather than teleological, ontological, or materialist, dialectic. That is, Mailer wants to base the legitimacy of the democratic process on the degree of intensity and passion with which individuals, together and in concert, engage with that process rather than on the efficacy and wisdom of the decisions that that process happens to produce. Thus, for Mailer, democratic politics must, by definition, “partake of mystery,” for it is the mystery of the origin of freedom—that existential dialectic of dread and possibility, of anxiety and action—that confronts the existential subject, which ultimately lends any decision making process, whether political or personal, its authenticity (100). Political freedom, for Mailer, is intrinsically linked to existential freedom, in that it is impossible to conceive without risk, and is affirmed only through creative struggle and choice. Democracy, as Mailer wants to define it, is the attempt to affirm this dynamic understanding of human freedom within an ethicopolitical framework that puts the emphasis on political struggle and resistance as the expression of that freedom, rather than as a means towards its ultimate and final achievement.

Mailer’s stance, then, is a manifestly formalist one. By positing the primacy of the idea of the revolutionary as the affirmation of the fact of existential freedom within the formal dialectical dynamic that both endows democracy with its perpetual capacity to embrace political and social change, as well as to ensure its ethical reproduction, Mailer rejects the conceptual connection of democracy with the expression of any specific content, be it that of an ideology, institution, group, historical circumstance, or class. However, it is not that the constant and productive tension between the forces of continuity and those of the revolutionary,

which Mailer portrays as the meta-historical substructure of all democratic political and social struggles, divorces the question of content from the concerns of democratic legitimacy. Nor does his formalist strategy aim to achieve a kind of universality by conflating the imperatives of form with the emergence of a substantive ethical or political content. Rather Mailer's approach is an attempt to relate the preservation and influence of democratic principles (political equality, self-determination, participation etc.) to the exercise of existential freedom (struggle, choice, risk, and creativity) within a framework capable of encompassing both the tension and identity which, for Mailer, characterizes their association.

It is on these terms that Mailer engages with the perpetual dilemma of liberal democracy—the reconciliation of the democratic demand for political organization (the question of political and state power) with the liberal concern for the freedom of the individual (the question of subjectivity). What keeps the on-going tension between the demands of a democratic state and those of existential subjectivity productive rather than antinomian, for Mailer, is the crucial correlation that emerges between democratic participation and existential action. Quite simply, for Mailer, citizenship in a democracy bears inescapable existential implications. Or otherwise stated, citizenship, which is a term that describes any form of engagement with a larger political community, can only be considered legitimately democratic, for Mailer, if the possibility to concurrently exercise existential choice and political power is present.

This possibility, which we have been referring to as the “idea of the revolutionary” in Mailer's work, draws together the existentialist imperative to

confront the freedom inherent in the possibility of authentic choice and the political responsibility inherent in exercising that freedom within a social, and thus ethical, context. In this respect Mailer is neither a radical existentialist nor a devoted idealist, just as he is neither an orthodox liberal nor a strict republican<sup>10</sup>. It is, rather, obvious from Mailer's work, that his intention is to develop a political approach that offers a dynamic and dramaturgical perspective, highlighting the psychological and expressive aspects of American politics, rather than just its institutional apparatus, and thus call attention to what he believes are the inescapable aesthetic elements of liberal democracy and democratic citizenship.

Mailer's recognition of the technocratic negation of the presence of the revolutionary within contemporary American politics reveals not just the emergence of a reductive conception of political practice—what has been called “an apolitical form of politics”—that is fundamentally at odds with the American democratic tradition, but also a reductive aesthetic, a consequent depreciation of the individual experience of the existential significance and power of the political realm to the merely instrumental. In America, for Mailer, democracy is both constituted by individual actions and is constitutive of those actions. The democratic citizen is not an actor with a stable and fixed identity whose political actions merely express a particular point of view. Rather democracy in America is, at least in part, a performance, an institutional and psychic space where citizens, individually and in groups, can discover the depth of experience that lies between what is possible (politics) and what is conceivable (ideals and principles).

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<sup>10</sup> For an argument that attempts to place Mailer's work within a strictly republican tradition of political rhetoric, see Sean McCann's “The Imperiled Republic: Norman Mailer and the Poetics of Anti-Liberalism.”



This aesthetic sensibility, this understanding of the dramatic and creative quality of democratic politics, is what informs Mailer's understanding of the fundamental link between what he calls "existential styles of political thought" and the American democratic tradition (Mailer 1968 137). It also accounts for Mailer's hope that the March would mark, to some extent, a rediscovery of this political aesthetic, and a significant return to the imaginative and inventive in American politics:

The aesthetic of the New Left now therefore began with the notion that authority could not comprehend nor contain nor finally manage to control any political action whose end was unknown. They could attack it, beat it, jail it, misrepresent it, and finally abuse it, but they could not feel a sense of victory because they could not understand a movement which inspired thousands and hundreds of thousands to march without a coordinated plan. (102)

Seeking to explain the connection between what he calls Mailer's "symbolic/existential" approach to politics, referring to the political aesthetic alluded to above, and Mailer's obvious concern with the role of the individual in mass politics, political theorist Joshua Miller points to what he argues is the core political issue of the *The Armies of the Night*—"the self as the point of entry into political truth" (Miller 381).

The importance that Mailer attributes to the existential and aesthetic aspects of the March, for Miller, is indicative of a political approach that places "an emphasis on experience and feeling over ideology" and that attempts to shape power via "symbolic actions [...] [that] affect consciousness" rather than via more mainstream and efficacious methods of achieving political ends (386-395). For Miller, Mailer is not really interested in the New Left's "symbolic/existential" approach as a method for influencing policy, but rather he is compelled by its



attempt to transcend politics, to reach “a plane of truth or experience that exists beyond the horizon of common sense thinking and everyday activity,” and thus approach political truth through feeling and subjective experience rather than reason (388). Miller finds this approach inspirational but worries that “the danger of the New Left’s distrust of rationality is that they may be discarding reason along with rationalism [arguing that] [...] if reason is disparaged, the basis for political conversation is lost” (385-386).

Miller’s concerns, with their Habermasian overtones, are both trenchant and timely in that they rightly call attention to the practical consequences for democracy of a mode of politics too enamored of expressivism and subjectivism, and too dismissive of reason. However, Miller’s insistence on drawing no distinction between “existential” and “symbolic” politics in Mailer’s work—or as Miller puts it “I propose to keep the terms bound together like Siamese twins”—fails to take into account the tension between the two, which for Mailer, is at least as politically meaningful as their kinship (386).

Certainly both symbolic and existentialist modes of political practice provide avenues of potential resistance to the kinds of instrumentalism that Mailer identifies as technocratic and corporatist and which threatens to diminish democratic practice in America, and as such Mailer recognizes their mutuality. However, while both modes might offer a framework from which technocorporatist instrumentalism can be critiqued, and perhaps resisted, their respective frameworks are divergent in at least one significant respect. The fact that this divergence happens to concern the issue that Miller recognizes as the

political hub of the novel, the issue of political subjectivity, indicates the crucial nature of the distinction.

Both the symbolic and the existential conceptions of the political challenge the instrumental banishment of the aesthetic from the political realm by reasserting the creativity and imagination of political subjects as central components of legitimate democratic praxis. In fact, as Miller is right to point out, both are keen to emphasize the ambiguities and mysteries (Mailer's preferred term) of subjective experience, and its various representations, in their approaches to political action. However, when the recognition of the aesthetic as a vital aspect of democratic citizenship influences political action, as Mailer argues it does in the case of the March on the Pentagon, the question of political subjectivity becomes manifest in an assertion of political identity, and the symbolic and the existential political modes begin to drift apart.

Symbolic politics, referred to by Miller as "representational actions at emblematic targets," both, one presumes, recognizably political in nature, advocates an expressive approach to political identity (386). That is, symbolic political action is an attempt to articulate a kind of political consciousness, often grounded in an appeal to an ethical, moral, or experiential truth, through a kind of political practice which attempts to both transcend the political realm by employing the aesthetic, and engage it by connecting subjectivity, via the expression and interpretation of symbols, to the notion of citizenship. Thus, for Mailer, the experience of political identity, with its distinctive truth claims, individual passions, and moral visions, is projected onto the political realm.

In contrast to the symbolic, existential politics emerges from a performative, rather than an expressive, conception of political identity. Emphasizing the historicity of subjectivity, which for Mailer refers to the mutability that accompanies the dynamic imperatives of his democratic dialectic, existential politics understands political practice to be constitutive of political identity, as well as an articulation of it. In this sense political participation in a democracy is an enactment of political identity, an activity in which a political subject both produces an identity within the present power structure, and simultaneously destabilizes it by reaffirming, via the exercise of the power of decision, the possibility for the future subversion or disruption of the political identity thus constituted. In other words, existential politics understands political identity to be perpetually provisional and changeable, rather than transcendental in nature, part of the self's larger engagement with existential freedom, as well as with the sociopolitical dimensions of existence.

To conclude, as Miller does, that "symbolic politics and existential politics can be distinguished for the purposes of theory, but in practice they are joined" is to disregard the deep skepticism Mailer expresses regarding his experience of the march, and in particular the existential validity of the kind of political action it represents. In his speech at the Ambassador Theatre on the eve of the march, Mailer presents the impending action to the audience in the following terms: "We are up, face this, all of you, against an existential situation—we do not know how it is going to turn out, and what is even more inspiring of dread is that the government doesn't know either"(48). Beyond protesting the war in Vietnam—the primary symbolic intention of the march—Mailer is keen to identify a

concomitant existential message in the individual experience of anxiety that accompanies participating in an act whose guiding principle is to rediscover the political potency of the unforeseeable. Theoretically, Mailer finds it credible to speak of the promise of the march as both an expression of a particular set of political ideas, and a reaffirmation of the viability of political agency, or as he puts it with uncharacteristic succinctness, to be “at once a symbolic act and a real act” (57).

However, when Mailer turns his attentions away from theoretical considerations and towards more pragmatic matters—such as assessing the potential success and failure of the march—he is quick to acknowledge both the limitations of the expressivist political approach and the complexity inherent in existential political action. Certainly the symbolic elements of the march seek to ascribe a particular content to the experience of the political, however, as Mailer describes in the following passage, understanding the relationship between the symbolic purpose of a political action and political participation as a mode of human action, means resisting too easy an appeal to a particular content:

One did not march on the Pentagon and look to get arrested as a link in a master scheme to take over the bastions of the Republic step by step, no, that sort of sound-as-brickwork-logic was left to the FBI. Rather, one marched on the Pentagon because... because... and here the reasons became so many and so curious and so vague, so political and so primitive, that there was no need, or perhaps no possibility to talk about it yet. (100)

Ending the war in Vietnam is, for Mailer, certainly a worthy and desirable goal, however, approaching the march as nothing more than a symbolic means towards a political end is, in effect, to accept the technocorporatist reduction of the meaning of the political to the merely instrumental. Political action, as Mailer

wants to define it, is a mode of human action that must be understood, not just in terms of the pursuit of a larger goal or purpose, or even in terms of the expression of the values and ideals that underwrite a purpose, but also in terms of its means, in terms of its existential complexity. If one wants to understand the implication of the march for political subjectivity, one has to come to terms with the relationship between purpose and means that is embodied in political action. It is to this relationship that Mailer is referring when he describes the reasons for participating in the march as “so political and so primitive.”

In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer is clearly wrestling with what Yaron Ezrahi calls “the liberal-democratic problem of action,” or “the problem of converting the actions of individual persons into legitimate public actions without denying the integrity and autonomy of the actors” (15). It is, for Mailer, a matter of fundamental existential importance that engaging in political action in a liberal democracy should be understood as the equivalent of tugging the political subject in two directions. The subject whose connection to certain values and ideals is strong enough to shape a commitment to particular purposes (the emergence of political subjectivity), but whose power to achieve those purposes is neither direct nor immediate, can seek to express that commitment through political action. However, the translation of purposes into political action opens up the possibility that the values and ideals which are at the root of purposes, and to which the subject is committed, may be undermined or significantly challenged, by exposing them to the struggle with other ideals and opposing objectives which, for Mailer, defines the political sphere. Thus, for the political subject, political action expresses those values and ideals on which political identity is based, however, it

also puts the integrity of those values, and the political identity thus enacted, at risk of being compromised by engaging in political struggle.

Putting one's values and political subjectivity through the ordeal of existential political action, risking the unknown consequences of translating values into purposes and then acting with the understanding that those values and ideals are both mutable and impermanent is, for Mailer, the most compelling reason for participating in the march. For when political action is also existential in nature, political participation becomes an opportunity for shaping and revealing identity via the only means—conflict—which, in Mailer's view, can account for the tension between the commitment to particular values that defines political identity and the inescapable plurality, the absence of one ultimate purpose, that defines a political association comprised of autonomous individuals. Technocorporatism responds to the "tensions between the requirements of public action and the values of voluntary individualism" by imposing an instrumental paradigm of action onto the political sphere, thus attempting to dissipate the tension by delegitimizing actions whose consequences are too unpredictable. Mailer, of course, paints this instrumental colonization of the political sphere as totalitarian in nature, embracing instead a mode of action that holds the interdependency and conflict between individuality and public identity to be a reflection of vitality in a liberal democracy, rather than a problem inherent in its framework.

Action, as Hannah Arendt famously argues in *The Human Condition*, is intimately connected with the creation of the new, and therefore with unpredictability. What Arendt calls "the primordial and specifically human act," or what she also describes as the "insert[ion of] one's self into the world" is a

means of both revolution and revelation (Arendt 178, 186). These are the terms which best correspond to what Mailer is getting at when he refers to the “political” and “primitive” aspects of political action. Action, as Arendt would have it, is “the actualization of the human condition of natality,” or more plainly, it is the performance of beginning and the manifestation of the unpredictable nature of human life. For both Mailer and Arendt, inherent in the human capability to act, the capacity to bring about the new, is the very possibility of freedom. However, freedom, no matter how prehistorical in nature, does not generally provide action with a particular character; it very rarely lends action a specific content. Rather meaning is given to action, particularly political action, to the extent that it discloses an agent, or as Arendt would have it, to the extent that “men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world” (179).

This is not to imply, of course, that ideas and values are not important aspects of political action, but rather that they are merely determinate in nature, and that democratic politics, as a realm that deals with uncertainty, cannot be reduced to an instrumental relation, however substantial, between action and the manifestation of an end it is meant to advance. In fact, it seems clear to Mailer that political action, understood from the viewpoint of sheer utility, amounts to the disengagement of action from actors, and thus a denial of what, for him, are the two fundamental pillars of liberal democratic citizenship—the unpredictability of outcome that accompanies freedom, and the revelation of self which accompanies action, and which is both an assertion and a putting at risk of individual identity.



George Kateb argues that any attempt to understand this often-contrary relationship between democratic political action and the liberal encouragement of individuality, must take into account the perspective put forward on the matter by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and his two famous intellectual descendents Henry Thoreau and Walt Whitman. It is in this body of work, Kateb tells us, that we find “the richest presentation of the doctrine of democratic individuality;” a tradition that Mailer makes a clear effort to engage in *The Armies of the Night* (Kateb, “Democratic Individuality” 332). What distinguishes the doctrine of democratic individuality, both as a theory and as a moral ideal, is the notion that in American liberal democracy the relation between the spirit of democracy and individualism, between democratic political action and the expression of individual identity, is marked by tension, but also defined by mutual dependence. As Kateb interprets it: “The meaning of the theory of democratic individuality is that each moral idea needs the other: both to bring out its most brilliant potentialities and to avoid the most sinister ones” (333).

Mailer’s Emersonian disposition toward democratic individuality is evident, not just in the political and existential matters discussed above, but also in the manner in which they relate to the very structure of the novel. By inscribing his own subjectivity as such an unavoidable point of reference in *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer makes the meaning of the political action being described, and the individuality of the perspective offered, codependent and mutually refining aspects of the narrative. The struggle that many critics identify in the book between objective reporting and subjective experience may be an important issue in judging the journalistic or historical merits of the novel, but it is the tense connection



between Mailer's self-consciousness, and his participation in a mass political action, that anchors the narrative, and which emerges as perhaps the most fundamental political theme of the book.

As John Whalen-Bridge has rightly pointed out, "no postwar fiction was more committed to a group political action than Mailer's *Armies of the Night* even though that book expends half of its energy distancing its author from the social movement with which he is inextricably linked" (107). Mailer's effort to reconcile his idea of himself as a staunch individualist and anti-conformist with the moral obligation he feels to participate in a mass action, whose organizational and institutional aspects are antithetical to his individualistic mindset, reveals the friction that lies at the heart of democratic individuality. This is not to suggest that *The Armies of the Night* attempts to resolve the contradictions that inevitably emerge between liberal individualism and the spirit of democracy simply through an appeal for principled participation. Rather, Mailer's narrative strives to forge a connection between the two often discordant ideas through a commitment to a performative political identity, a voice that asserts itself aesthetically and politically, but is self-conscious of its provisionality, of its historicity, of what Mailer calls its "existential style."

Malini Johar Schueller claims that this authorial position is indicative of a general impetus in *The Armies of the Night* toward what she calls a "politics of difference." According to Schueller, Mailer "questions the concept of the unified subject at the core of liberal ideology by speaking through a voice that resists being singular or whole," and his whole political argument in the book "is predicated on an authorial voice that is continually diverse and multiple and that

stresses the numerous (borrowed) literary and ideological voices within it” (Schueller 125). While Schueller points to this narrative approach as evidence of Mailer’s preference for “a politics of radical heterogeneity, one without ideological constants,” one could just as easily interpret Mailer’s position as a reassertion of the Emersonian call for a philosophical or poetic apprehension of the self, an aesthetic conception of the individual that expands both the political and the existential possibilities offered by liberal democratic citizenship. Indeed, Mailer’s acknowledgement of the historicity and provisionality of political identity is evidence enough that he resists the solidification or congelation of the political subject, particularly around conceptions of universal or instrumental reason, and considers such tendencies to be totalitarian. However, to characterize this resistance as a repudiation of the liberal self, as a radical postmodern critique of subjectivity, is to deny the emphasis that Mailer places on the importance of the political as an extraordinary individual experience, as an occasion for individual thinking, radical choice, and self-expression, or what Emerson famously termed “self-reliance.”

As Mailer “The Citizen” emerges alongside Mailer “The Novelist” and Mailer “The Historian” in the *The Armies of the Night*, the implications of political participation on his own sense of self, poses a crucial personal and intellectual dilemma for Mailer. Is political involvement ever compatible with individuality, or does citizenship always require, to some degree, the subordination of the self to a greater purpose, process, or authority? Mailer makes it quite clear in *The Armies of the Night* that like Emerson and Whitman, he considers his individual work to be the most effective form of engagement available to him. Confronted with the

dilemma of whether or not to sign on to a protest refusing to pay a planned surtax designed to help meet the costs of the war in Vietnam, Mailer “had piped up every variety of the extraordinarily sound argument that his work was the real answer to Vietnam, and these mass demonstrations, sideshows, and bloody income tax protests just took energy and money away from the real thing—getting the work out” (70).

What finally convinces Mailer to sign the protest is not a strong belief in its potential to achieve its desired end, nor is it a compulsion to sacrifice his private security for a greater cause. Rather, Mailer begins to perceive very strongly the connection between his idea of himself and the moral and existential meaning of political action. Mailer writes:

He had been suffering more and more in the past few years from the private conviction that he was getting a little soft, a hint curdled, perhaps an almost invisible rim of corruption was growing around the edges. His career, his legend, his idea of himself—were they stale? So he had no real alternative—he was not sufficiently virtuous to eschew the income tax protest, and had signed, and to his surprise had been repaid immediately by the abrupt departure of a measurable quantity of moral congestion, a noticeable lowering of his spiritual flatulence. [...] Yes, signing the protest had been good for him. (71)

Despite references to notions of “virtue” and “morality” in connection to political participation, Mailer is not, in this passage, restating the classical republican sentiment of citizenship being founded on the individual desire to act virtuously, on the subordination of individual interests to the interests of the public good. Rather, Mailer simply recognizes that his idea of himself includes a conscience, that while his work offers him a form of political engagement more consistent with

his ideals and less likely to demand the subordination or denial of the self, he could not shake the sense that “no project had seemed to cost him enough” (70).

Politics is without a doubt a lower realm for Mailer, a world where the demands of compromise and self-denial abound, and where the dangers of conformity and instrumentalism can restrict the expression and development of the self. Thus, as Mailer’s hesitancy regarding the protest indicates, he believes it appropriate that the individual should enter the political realm with reluctance and wariness. However, political action undertaken in accordance with one’s conscience, courting risk and self-loss as a moral choice, as a matter of conviction, is an affirmation of the moral idea of individuality, an integral part of self-development. Mailer’s concerns regarding the dangers of mass politics on the development of the individual are extensive and pervade the novel. But his experience of citizenship, his decision to engage himself in political conflict, leads Mailer to better understand the extent to which his identity, his understanding of himself, is challenged by the ethical demands of America’s democratic principles.

A vital democracy then, for Mailer, presents the individual with a moral proposition, an existential choice, and a set of political institutions. By coming to know himself better as a citizen, as an individual with a sense of moral responsibility, capable of public action, despite the uncertainties and risks of the political realm, and knowing the contingent and contestable nature of the beliefs which compel him to action, Mailer stresses his allegiance to the set of principles which animate the American democratic tradition, while affirming the diversity and historicity of identity and values which underwrite the liberal ideals of individual freedom and personal autonomy. If there is a theory of citizenship

undergirding Mailer's participation in the March, it is one that remains committed to a form of liberal selfhood capable of reason, self-consciousness, detachment, and moral agency, but also to the democratic principles of the perpetual contestability and plurality of values; to a politics which provides a context for individual expression and experience, but which is also profoundly unsettling<sup>11</sup> in its exposure of the changeability and contingency of all conventions and ideologies, including the conventions and ideologies of identity. For Mailer, the conflict of positions, interests, and values is a permanent and indispensable feature of democratic politics, but only an extraordinary feature of individuality. This tension between democratic virtue and liberal individualism is not meant to be resolved via citizenship, but only episodically experienced, intensified, performed, and thereby sustained. Mailer makes it quite clear, in *The Armies of the Night*, that when it comes to entering the political realm, reluctance, on the part of the individual, is an appropriate approach. However, there are times and contexts, conflicts and moral dilemmas, whose "logic might compel sacrifice from those who were not so accustomed" (92). When such an instance does arise, and for Mailer the war in Vietnam represents such an instance, it is the idea of the revolutionary, with its formal and experiential possibilities that imbue the notion of liberal democratic citizenship with existential and moral meaning, which is at stake.

Mailer's description of himself as a Left Conservative, a position that he defines as the belief that "radical measures were sometimes necessary to save the

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<sup>11</sup> The term "unsettled" is used mindful of George Kateb's contention that "Democracy unsettles everything (though not all at once) and therefore permits the slow growth of individuality. But it unsettles everything for everyone, and thus liberates *democratic* individuality" (Kateb, "Democratic Individuality" 339).

root,” is indicative of Mailer’s insistence that his radical tendencies are in no way foreign to his strong allegiance to the ideals and values on which the American liberal democratic consensus has been built (207). For Mailer, there are precious few political ideas more fundamental to the founding of America than the idea of the revolutionary, the formal acceptance of the possibility of change and the irreducibility of political conflict that provides the conditions under which liberal democracy can be maintained. The danger posed by technocorporatism and its attendant anti-political ideologies, the tendencies in American political life that Mailer diagnoses as totalitarian, is the threat of stasis, the denial of the existential and oppositional dynamics that both energize the forces of change and reaffirm the value of consensus. John Diggins, in terms tellingly similar to Mailer’s, has described the kind of liberalism peculiar to America as “a liberalism that embraces radical means to achieve conservative ends” (Diggins, *Lost Soul* 4). It is a kind of liberalism that, to paraphrase Samuel Huntington, understands conflict to be the child of consensus, and which, as Mailer’s narrative in *The Armies of the Night* seeks to demonstrate, opens up the political realm to the moral and existential tension between individualism and social conscience which is the raw stuff of citizenship in a liberal democracy.

In recent decades the emphasis on conflict and antagonism as fundamental to the sustenance of liberal democracy has engaged the attention of many contemporary political theorists. Thinkers such as John Gray, with his notion of “agonistic liberalism”<sup>12</sup>, Chantal Mouffe, with her appeal for an “agonistic

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<sup>12</sup> See Gray “Agonistic Liberalism.”

pluralism<sup>13</sup>,” and William Connolly, with his theory of “agonal democracy<sup>14</sup>,” have all attempted to reassert the primacy of the political over, amongst others, the instrumental, juridical, or theoretical. Despite the differences in their ideological and philosophical positions, these theorists all draw a crucial connection between the contemporary crisis of liberal democratic citizenship and the growing influence of anti-political ideologies, practices, institutions, and theories. They, like Mailer, seek to pit the principle of liberal democratic tension, the legitimating and constitutive role of political antagonism and struggle, against those forces that seek the further neutralization of political possibility. Their work, in essence, is a much more theoretically sophisticated expression of what underwrites Mailer’s political commitment in *The Armies of the Night*—the desire to reaffirm the experience of the revolutionary, the individual encounter with contingency and the moral implications of diversity in the political realm, that marks the foundational tension between political action and existential subjectivity, and thus reclaim some of the possibilities of liberal democratic citizenship.

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<sup>13</sup> See Mouffe *The Return of the Political*.

<sup>14</sup> See Connolly *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Haunted Democracy: Secrecy, Paranoia and Legitimacy in Norman Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost*, and Don DeLillo's *Libra* and *Underworld***

“Secrecy, being an instrument of conspiracy, ought never to be the system of a regular government.”

–Jeremy Bentham, “On Publicity”

One of the qualities that distinguish liberal democracy is the ambiguous attitude it encourages toward state and political power. The fusion of liberal individualism and democratic equality characteristic of liberal democracy creates a tension between the deeply entrenched liberal suspiciousness regarding state coercion and the democratic necessity of utilizing state power to pursue equality, ensure popular participation, and to achieve common goals. In other words, liberalism seeks to defend the primacy of the freedom of the individual against state power, while democracy promotes the equality and the benefit of the community largely through its employment. Liberalism demands the separation of state and society, of the public and private realms, in order to safeguard individual liberty, while democracy blurs this distinction in order to further the imperatives of equality and the needs of the polity. This inherent tension in liberal democracy creates a deeply rooted equivocalness concerning the uses of political power, an ambiguity that underlies the liberal democratic belief in the legitimizing nature of democratic processes and procedures. The formal and institutional arrangements designed to ensure the transparency and accountability of the exercise of state power is the primary means by which liberal democracies seek to balance liberalism's inherent mistrust of government with the democratic need for it. A fundamental tenet of liberal democracy is that political power is only legitimate if



it is exercised within a system of rules and procedures that expose it to public scrutiny and subject it to processes of popular control that formalize its claim to be in the public interest. In itself this does not resolve the fundamental tension between liberal principles and the demands of effective governance but rather institutionalizes the liberal democratic faith that process can legitimately restrain the secretive and exclusive tendencies it believes are inherent in the exercise of power. The ever-present strain of this compromise, which liberal democracy attempts to forge between the contradictory precepts of liberalism and the requirements of state authority in a democracy, is perhaps most obviously apparent in the state power deployed in response to the demands of national security.

In postwar America, the massive deployment of state power in the name of national security, often referred to as the national security state, particularly in response to the development of the cold war, has led to a series of scandals and revelations concerning illegal, secretive, and covert actions taken by government agencies or agents in violation of basic democratic procedures and processes, that have fueled popular perceptions that the real political power wielded in America is clandestine and operates outside of the liberal democratic system. What investigations into the activities of the CIA and FBI and scandals such as Watergate and the Iran-Contra Affair have exposed is the extent to which secrecy is routinely utilized by intelligence agencies and other power structures attached to the government, often to shield their activities from the constraints placed on them by the American democratic process. While the paranoid excesses of the McCarthy era had been stoked by fears of the dangers posed to American democracy by communist infiltration, the popular paranoia and fascination with

conspiracy encouraged by fears of an “invisible government”<sup>1</sup> which secretly runs America, and by the unresolved doubts surrounding the official explanation of the Kennedy assassination, has exacerbated the growing skepticism in the American public’s attitude towards the democratic legitimacy of their political institutions and encouraged the widespread belief that it is the CIA, large corporations, and other shadowy organizations that are really in control of the government.

Aside from being an essential talking-point of politics in postwar America, secrecy, paranoia, and conspiracy are a seemingly ubiquitous thematic interest of the postwar American novel. A short list of narrative explorations of this cultural and political motif could include such novels as William Gaddis’s *Carpenters Gothic*, Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, and Joan Didion’s *The Last Thing He Wanted*. These authors, and others such as William Burroughs, Kurt Vonnegut, Kathy Acker, Joseph Heller, and of course the two authors whose work is discussed in this chapter—Norman Mailer and Don DeLillo—are often referred to as belonging to the “paranoid school” of American fiction, a designation that points to their shared interest in conspiratorial explanations for historical or political events, or as Timothy Melley explains, they “have all produced narratives in which large governmental, corporate, or social systems appear uncannily to control individual behavior and in which characters seem paranoid, either to themselves or to other characters in the novel” (8). Of course, there is no shortage of critical attention being paid to this preoccupation with paranoia, secrecy, and conspiracy, not just in postwar American fiction, but also in postwar American

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<sup>1</sup> A phrase given popular currency by David Wise and Thomas Ross, in their influential book on secret intelligence agencies in the United States, *The Invisible Government*, originally published in 1964.

culture in a larger sense. Alongside Melley's *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (2000), recent years have seen the publication of Peter Knight's excellent *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files* (2000), and Patrick O'Donnell's *Latent Destinies: Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narratives* (2000). It has also seen the publication of the first examples of what one critic, Michael Wood, refers to as "post-paranoid" American fiction, namely Thomas Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon* (1997) and Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997). It is *Underworld* which has particularly caught the attention of observers of paranoid culture, with both Knight and O'Donnell, along with Wood, finding in its self-conscious "end of the cold war" narrative perspective a marked shift in DeLillo's approach to paranoia, now infused with a sense of irony and even nostalgia. Paranoia, as it is presented in *Underworld*, is no longer a subversive or even radical response to a world fraught with secrecy, threat, and the abuses of power by an "invisible government," but has developed, in the post-cold war world, into a style of resigned skepticism and pessimism tailored to fit an irredeemably corrupted world controlled and determined by forces that are too complex and enigmatic to understand and which operate far beyond the reach or resistance of democratic agency.

The general claim presented here, that both Mailer and DeLillo offer important narrative responses regarding the degree to which the postwar obsession with secrecy and conspiracy has eroded faith in democratic legitimacy and political agency in America, is one considered by most commentators on cultural paranoia that express an interest in "paranoid fiction." Often, however, this political thread is left dangling by critics in order to pursue lines of inquiry that

stress the epistemological, historical, overtly cultural, or even spiritual issues raised by their interpretive approaches. The discussion of Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost* and DeLillo's *Libra* and *Underworld* which follows, draws extensively on the insights, perceptions, and theoretical interpretations proffered by the growing number of critiques of paranoia as an important characteristic of contemporary American fiction, but attempts to offer a distinguishing emphasis on how this thematic interest in secrecy and conspiracy, particularly as it is represented in their novels which reflect back on events during the cold war period in America, might offer a response to the cynical and skeptical state of American liberal democratic morale. Even if, as Wood suggests, "the great age of American paranoia" is now past, there is little doubt that both Mailer and DeLillo seem keenly interested in tracking the residual impact of America's cold war experience with secrecy and conspiracy, as well as emerging forms of paranoia, as it continues to shape institutional attitudes and imprint on the American political consciousness (Wood 3).

### Spooks and Agencies: *Harlot's Ghost* as a Response to the Culture of Secrecy

In an interview with Scott Spenser, which appeared in the *Guardian* following the publication of *Harlot's Ghost*, Mailer provides this insight into his shift in attitude towards the CIA, precipitated by his research for the novel:

By the time I started *Harlot's Ghost* my attitude towards the CIA was no longer hostile. At one point, I believed that the CIA was the most sinister organization we have, but I came to think it was the most sinister bureaucracy—and my novel became a comedy of manners. (Spenser 21)

In fact, it is this representation of the CIA, as “an overgrown bureaucracy, forever tripping over its own feet,” that Louis Menand, reviewing *Harlot's Ghost* in *The New Yorker*, finds most disagreeable about the novel (Menand 118). He contrasts *Harlot's Ghost's* rather comic portrait of the cold war CIA and its various clandestine machinations, plots, and operations—particularly the rather fanciful schemes to assassinate Fidel Castro—with what he calls the “uncanny prescience” which characterizes so many of the “CIA eminences” Mailer portrays (118). That an organization, whose “conspiratorial energies are shown to be wasted in turf wars with the FBI and the State Department,” and whose operational terrain “is so slippery that all its intelligence turns out to be moot anyway,” was staffed at the highest levels by agents with an underlying strategy, which now appears to have been efficacious, to exaggerate the extent of the Communist threat in order to “stoke anti-Communist militancy in the American public,” promote American military spending and buildup, and “thus hurry the inevitable day when Communism would collapse of its own inefficiency,” seems, to Menand, to be an indication that “Mailer is now apparently happy to accept this version of winner's history” (118).

According to Menand, Mailer's novel fails to address the political, intellectual, and economic damage, particularly to the political left in America, wrought by the forty years or so of “hysterical accusations and counter-accusations of being ‘soft on Communism,’” and the often quite terrible human consequences of the interventionist foreign policy justified by the American government and its agencies in the name of anti-Communism (118). He takes exception to what he describes as Mailer's “fantasy” that the kind of anti-communism propagated by the

CIA during the cold war amounted to little more than “a chess game played to perpetuate the illusion that Communism was a greater threat than we secretly knew it to be,” arguing that “if Mailer believes this [...] there is no indication in *Harlot's Ghost* that he thinks any less of American foreign policy, or of the CIA, for it” (118-119). However, it is probably too perfunctory a political reading that concludes that *Harlot's Ghost* is an apology for the CIA, or Mailer an example of a prominent former critic of American cold war policy “jumping on the bandwagon” of “winner's history.” Rather, a more sympathetic reader, one not looking for a blanket condemnation of “the cold war mentality,” might plausibly regard *Harlot's Ghost* as Mailer's imaginative attempt to account, not for the contribution of the CIA and its methods to the West's victory in the cold war, but rather for the curious failure of the CIA to provide accurate intelligence, its inability “to see clearly the nature of the Soviet threat,” which was, as Daniel Patrick Moynihan reminds us in his 1998 book *Secrecy*, “the very purpose it [the CIA] was designed to serve” (Moynihan 181). Rather than expressing outright condemnation or disdain, Mailer, in *Harlot's Ghost*, encourages a better understanding of the nature of the CIA as the most effective approach to confronting its cold war ghosts that continue to haunt the corridors of both the American government and the American political imagination.

While it is certainly the case that Mailer's novel ventures down many an imaginative path that a social scientist like Moynihan would surely object to as unsubstantiated speculation, both books are the product of their authors' intense interest in the many historical, political, and ethical controversies which cluster around the apparent failure, on the part of the American government, to foresee the

collapse of the Soviet Union, despite the immense expense and expansion of American intelligence agencies<sup>2</sup>. Both Moynihan and Mailer point the finger directly at what Moynihan calls “the culture of secrecy” which developed around issues of national security during the uneasy days of the cold war (16). However, while the two writers pursue a similar historical theme—the nature and impact of the burgeoning of state secrecy in America—Mailer, having recourse to the tools of a novelist rather than those of a senate committee member or a social scientist, argues he is afforded “a unique opportunity” to fashion a “superior” history of the CIA “out of an enhancement of the real, the unverified, and the wholly fictional” (Mailer, *Harlot's Ghost* 1173). Mailer contends that *Harlot's Ghost* is an attempt to “offer an imaginary CIA that will move in parallel orbit to the real one,” and thus delve deeper into the broader meaning of the CIA and its secretive actions during the cold war than can be revealed by a more empirical effort to outline and assess “the spectrum of facts and often calculated misinformation that still surrounds them” (1173-1174). Claiming that following the evidential rules of traditional historical enquiry—providing the reader “every instant with a scorecard of what actually happened and what was made up,”— would fail to adequately engage the imagination of his audience, Mailer mingles “the factual with the fictional” in order to better “nourish [...] our sense of reality” (1173). More than present a historically or ideologically correct portrait of the CIA, *Harlot's Ghost*,

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<sup>2</sup> The contention that the CIA overestimated the strength of the Soviet military and failed to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union is a matter of ongoing debate amongst historians of American intelligence. Perspectives which reject Moynihan's charges can be found in: Douglas J. MacEachin's *CIA Assessments of the Soviet Union: The Record Versus the Charges*, Richard Kerr's article in the New York Times, “CIA's Record Stands Up to Scrutiny,” and Gerald K. Haines and Robert E. Leggett's *CIA Analysis of the Soviet Union 1947-1991*. Haines and Leggett, in particular, respond to Moynihan's arguments in *Secrecy*.



according to its author, endeavors to “understand the tone of its inner workings” (1169).

*Harlot's Ghost* traces the development of the CIA, from its origins in the OSS after World War II, through the heady days of the early cold war period, the remarkable episodes of the Cuban missile crisis and the Bay of Pigs invasion, the turbulent era of the Vietnam War, the murky events of Watergate, and into the early Reagan era, depicting the decline of the CIA into a breeding ground, not just for conspiracy and covert activity, but also for elitism, adventurism, and egotism. In effect, Mailer offers an account, partly fiction and partly fact, of the downward path of the CIA, from an agency designed to help defend American democracy by providing its duly elected representatives with vital intelligence, an organization which aspired to become “the mind of America,” into a vast and unmanageable bureaucracy capable, in the name of national security, of indulging its most absurd fantasies of power and control—how else can one characterize a plot to kill Fidel Castro with an exploding seashell.

It is not difficult to see why many critics characterize Mailer's narrative approach to the CIA in *Harlot's Ghost* as an expression of a paranoid style of fiction, or an example of the fascination of contemporary American culture with conspiracy theories. Peter Knight, in particular, points to Mailer's “deep attraction to the generic conventions of the thriller and the clandestine romance of the intelligence agencies,” as an example of the “dialectic of fear and fantasy” about “the world of secret power” that has “permeated American fiction and films” in the postwar period (*Conspiracy Culture* 29-30). Indeed, there is little doubt that as a tale rife with conspiracies, cover-ups, official secrets, and clandestine operations,



*Harlot's Ghost* contains all the conventions of a spy thriller—the fact that the novel's protagonist and narrator Harrick “Harry” Hubbard works as a ghost-writer of “pro CIA novels” as part of his duties as an agent, does indicate that Mailer is quite aware of the appeal and power of these conventions. However, as a rather detailed immersion into the technocratic inner structure of a vast bureaucracy whose primary function seems to be the systemic creation and retention of secrets, Mailer's novel spends at least as much time and effort relating the intricacies and rituals of a rationalized organization, as it does romanticizing about some murky and sinister “clandestine other world” (30).

Still, there is no doubt that *Harlot's Ghost* taps into postwar America's obsession with conspiracy, calling on the general sense of suspicion and mistrust of government which colors the image of the CIA in the popular American political consciousness to lend plausibility to the host of speculations he offers surrounding the activities of the CIA, ranging from the well-worn suggestions of possible Agency involvement in the assassination of President Kennedy and the death of Marilyn Monroe, to a rather complicated plot involving CIA finances, the Watergate break-in, and the death of Agency operative, and author of spy novels, E. Howard Hunt's wife in a plane crash. Public disclosure of the covert, unauthorized, and illegal nature of many CIA operations and activities, particularly those brought to light by the 1975 Senate Select Committee on Government Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, whose investigation Harry Hubbard refers to in the novel as “the exposure of the Family Jewels,” as well as revelations regarding Watergate, the Iran-Contra affair, the existence of FBI files on sixties dissidents and protest groups, and the ever-lingering suspicions

regarding the Kennedy assassination, have all contributed to a general atmosphere of suspicion and secrecy that, as Mailer argues, bestows the events as he describes them in *Harlot's Ghost*, if not the authenticity of an historical account, then at least the sense that they respect the "proportions of the factual events" (1174).

In *Harlot's Ghost*, Mailer seems to have embraced the logic of what Richard Hofstadter, in his seminal 1952 essay, refers to as "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." Hofstadter argues that what "distinguishes the paranoid style," is not "the absence of verifiable facts [...] but rather the curious leap in imagination" that is always employed "at some critical point in the recital of events" (37). Mailer's "paranoid style," his manner of bringing together an accumulation of factual personages and circumstances which he then extrapolates into a fictional narrative that moves towards conspiracy as an explanation for real historical events, is exemplified in the following passage from *Harlot's Ghost*, in which the formidable figure of Harlot, Harry Hubbard's godfather and mentor, sets Harry straight regarding the real priorities of the CIA in the cold war world:

[Harry asks Harlot] 'But isn't it our priority in Europe to know when the Soviets might attack?'

[Harlot responds] 'That was a pressing question five or six years ago. The Red onslaught, however, is no longer all that military. Nonetheless, we keep pushing for an enormous defense buildup. Because, Harry, once we decide that the Soviet is militarily incapable of large military attacks, the American people will go soft on Communism. There's a puppy dog in the average American. Lick your boots, lick your face. Left to themselves, they'd just as soon be friends with the Russians. So we don't encourage news about all-out slovenliness in the Russian military machine.'

[...] 'I'm confused,' I [Harry] said. 'Didn't you once say that our real duty is to become the mind of America?'

'Well, Harry, not a mind that merely verifies what is true and not true. The aim is to develop teleological mind. Mind that dwells above the facts; mind that leads us to larger purposes.'

Harry, the world is going through exceptional convulsions. [...] Communism is the entropy of Christ, the degeneration of higher spiritual forms into lower ones. To oppose it, we must, therefore create a fiction—that the Soviets are a mighty military machine who will overpower us unless we are more powerful. (355)

By accounting for the apparent failure of the CIA to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union by hypothesizing about a conspiracy amongst high ranking agency figures to hide CIA intelligence of Soviet military and economic weakness from the American government and the American people in the name of a messianic anti-communism, Mailer's novel, if we accept Hofstadter's terms, is following in a longstanding American tradition, perpetuated by voices coming from both the political Right and Left, of hunting for secret conspiracies to explain historical events. This tradition, according to Hofstadter, is the product of a mentality unable to grasp that "mistakes, failures, or ambiguities" must always be taken into consideration when attempting to explain historical events, and that any attempt to understand history in terms of a "motive force" or "one overreaching, consistent theory," is a fundamental misunderstanding and distortion of how things happen ("Paranoid Tradition" 36-37, 29).

However, it is exactly the ambiguities and failures in the American democratic system that have been highlighted by repeated revelations in recent decades of conspiracies, cover-ups, and abuses of power that Mailer does take into consideration in his narrative method in *Harlot's Ghost*. As Mailer himself tells us, *Harlot's Ghost* is a product of his longstanding preoccupation with the "ambiguous and fascinating moral presence of the Agency in [American] national life" (1169). It calls attention to the conflict between the American liberal democratic ideal of openness and transparency in public affairs, and the many

instances of secret interventions and illegal subversions perpetrated by a state intelligence apparatus that acts under the auspices of a democratic government. However, the critique of America's experience of secrecy in *Harlot's Ghost* goes beyond just reinforcing this fundamental observation concerning democratic values. In *Harlot's Ghost*, Mailer suggests that the CIA, and the significant place it seems to occupy in the American imagination, reflects an important element in the prevailing character or spirit of postwar American society, a sensibility that continues, even in the post-cold war period, to haunt the American consciousness. Why are Americans so fascinated with secrecy and conspiracy? For Mailer, as his statement in his interview with Scott Spenser indicates, the answer seems to lie in the growing bureaucratization and corporatization of America. It reflects the kind of organizational and systemic culture that increasingly dominates the lives of American individuals. To borrow a common idiom of Mailer's, not for nothing is the CIA nicknamed "the Corporation."

The bureaucratic routinization of secrecy in America during the Cold War, epitomized in Mailer's novel by his depiction of the CIA as the fusion of rationalized administration and the generalized fantasy world of spies and clandestine plots, has not only lent paranoid political sensibilities and conspiracy theories a semblance of plausibility and even reasonability, but has, to a large extent, led to an overdeveloped fascination with state secrecy, and an obsession with the idea of secrecy in general within American politics and culture, that works to undermine the American individual's faith in the value of democratic politics. One of the aspects of the CIA that Mailer's depiction accentuates is that much of what it got up to, and labored to keep secret, during the Cold War, was

pretty petty and irrelevant business. Rather than as a sinister means for the CIA to manipulate and control political and historical events, secrecy, as Mailer's novel punctuates, was most often utilized by the CIA as a tool in the internal battle for influence and resources between governmental bureaucracies. It is a case that Senator Moynihan also makes when he points out how "within the confines of the intelligence community, too great attention was paid to hoarding information, defending boundaries, securing budgets, and other matters of corporate survival" (79). As one character in *Harlot's Ghost* puts it, when it comes to the CIA, "We're dealing with bureaucracy, and that's a whole other kingdom" (218). One of the ironies pursued by Mailer in *Harlot's Ghost* is that while secrecy became the dominant precept of that kingdom, which certainly put it in violation of what are supposed to be the democratic values underlying the American political system, often the significance of the secrets being protected did not necessarily merit the effort expended on keeping them secret.

This anti-democratic and disproportionate emphasis on secrecy did, however, magnify the significance and prominence of secrecy itself in the American political imagination. Confronted with a series of very public scandals detailing how arms of the American government sought to circumvent democratic processes and procedures to cover-up illegal and unethical activities, generally justified in the name of national security, Americans' faith in the democratic legitimacy of their government was significantly eroded.<sup>3</sup> Richard Gid Powers is quick to point out that while most Americans were not as dedicated to the thesis that the presence of a secret, covert, "invisible government", whose power

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of this "massive erosion of trust the American people have in their government," see Lionel Cliff's "Explanations: Deception in the U.S. Political System" (Cliff 57).

permeated all levels of American society, was the real key to understanding the history of the cold war, as the proliferation of revisionist historians, conspiracy theorists, and purveyors of paranoid culture might indicate, the notion that important information was being collected, manipulated, and kept secret by the state, and that significant power was being wielded by institutions whose practices flouted democratic openness and accountability, did have a profound effect on the mainstream American political consciousness. Encouraged by revelations concerning the state abuse of secrecy, a growing chorus of voices amongst journalists, academics, and political commentators for whom, as Powers puts it, “secrecy became the explanation for almost everything that ailed America,” and a government which continued to utilize official secrecy to an absurd extent<sup>4</sup>, secrecy was increasingly presumed to be a measure of the inherent value of knowledge and an indication of the influence and power of an organization (41). In other words, the situation seems to have developed within American politics and culture that anything kept secret accrues a greater aura of importance and power, no matter its actual significance, than that which is not.

Mailer’s style of narrative speculation certainly engages and reflects the skeptical and conspiracy-minded mood of contemporary American political sensibilities. However his fictional effort to “understand the tone of its [the CIA’s] inner workings,” reveals a “sinister bureaucracy” rather than a “sinister organization,” a CIA more Weberian than Machiavellian. We are told that in

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<sup>4</sup> As John Ralston Saul points out, “The problem of retention is so great that today 3.5 million Americans must be given various levels of security clearance in order to keep the system functioning” (*Voltaire’s Bastards* 289). Moynihan argues that “The Cold War has bequeathed to us a vast secrecy system that shows no sign of receding,” pointing, as partial evidence, to the fact that the US still produces over 6 million classified documents per year (214).

order to concentrate on writing the “detailed memoir of [his] life in the CIA,” referring to the fictional “Alpha” manuscript which constitutes the bulk of *Harlot’s Ghost*, Harry had to abandon his agency sanctioned literary project, “a monumental work on the KGB whose in-progress title was *The Imagination of the State*” (30). The notion, evoked in the title of Harry’s abandoned work, that the purpose of official secrecy is to serve and enhance the mythological or fabulous elements of state power, is the constant subtext of Mailer’s narrative. As the state becomes more rationalized and bureaucratic, secrecy as a means of controlling information has less to do with the sensitivity of the content of this or that particular fact to the interests of the state, and more to do with the exercise of structural or administrative power by those with technocratic interests at heart. In a society becoming increasingly technocratic, the measurement of any bureaucracy’s, and by extension any bureaucrat’s, power, is largely based on the amount of knowledge and information it/he/she controls. As John Ralston Saul points out, “One of the truly curious characteristics of this society is that the individual can most easily exercise power by retaining the knowledge which is in his hands” (*Voltaire’s Bastards* 287). This fundamentally undemocratic tendency creates a general atmosphere in which individuals “must treat the secret as a cult,” and encourages the rise of a political and cultural logic based around “a generalized fantasy life” in which “the fictional spy [...] [becomes] a glorified reflection of the citizen” (288). The act of keeping something secret, of retaining the most banal piece of information, is transformed by the technocratic imagination, into proof of its importance. Of course, the fact that something is not



kept secret, that information is public, is, by the same imaginative logic, proof of its unimportance.

As Saul recognizes much of the damage wrought by the heightening mood of suspicion and skepticism in American politics and culture can be measured by the impact that this “worship of the idea of secrecy” has on the individual’s conception of his/her democratic agency (287). Saul argues that if the perception that the real power determining the historical and political fate of the country is always wielded in secret continues to gain strength in the American imagination, and if, as Saul puts it, government bureaucracies continue to function as if “everything is secret unless there is a conscious decision to the contrary,” the view that participation in democratic politics is an important and worthwhile exercise will continue to lose credibility (287). As Saul observes:

The generalized secret has introduced such a terrible uncertainty into our society that citizens’s confidence in their own ability to judge public matters has been damaged. They constantly complain that they don’t know enough to make up their minds. They have a feeling that the mass of information available would not be available if it were truly worth having. The result is a despondent mental anarchy which prevents them from actively using the considerable powers democratic society has won. They are convinced that essential information is being held back. (288)

For Saul, as for Moynihan and for Mailer, one of the residual effects of the “culture of secrecy” that flourished during the cold war is the cultivation, in America, of a widespread belief that all the important decisions are taken by secretive government agencies and corporations, a perception that leads to a general cynicism and fatalism regarding the value of political engagement. The overwhelming image of the CIA that one takes away from *Harlot’s Ghost* is not that of a powerful invisible government or shadowy puppet-master of history—



though Mailer's portrayal of agency elitists whose desperation to believe just that conception of the CIA greatly enhances the novel's "comedy of manners" sensibility—but rather that of a massive, convoluted, poorly scrutinized bureaucracy whose obsession with collecting, retaining, and controlling information, mostly of the most mundane and banal nature, achieved fetishistic, and certainly paranoid, proportions.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than simply confirm the notion of an irredeemably corrupt invisible government that has taken over the reigns of the Republic, what Mailer attempts in his fictionalization of the cold war history of the CIA is to dramatize the tensions that always exist between the exercise of state power and the values of transparency and public accountability that legitimize American democracy. At the core of Mailer's imaginative depiction of the CIA—and particularly evident in his theory of the "High Holies"—is a bureaucracy with an inherent tendency to seek to hide, or even free itself altogether, from the restrictions and scrutiny of democratic processes and procedures. The critique of secrecy that Mailer offers in *Harlot's Ghost* is consistent with the liberal tradition in which state secrecy and democracy represent conflicting systems of political values. However, the

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<sup>5</sup> Perhaps one of the most telling passages in the novel concerning the extent of the CIA's fetish for secrecy is the following, in which Harry recalls the everyday practices of safeguarding information for a CIA agent during the Cold War:

For years there were none of us who did not lock every last piece of paper in our safes, and put whatever needless notes were left into the paper-shredder, but if one was in a hurry to get out after work, we deposited trash and empty milk cartons in our private safe to be disposed of in the morning. Reprimands for leaving any kind of paper behind were too serious. [...] I do not know what else it accomplished, but it gave gravity to our labors. Each piece of paper that one handled took on a density more palpable than ordinary paper until sometimes in the outside world, reading a magazine or merely handling a piece of stationary, or an ordinary letter, one would be struck with its ineffable lightness, and so much so that years later on reading Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, I thought immediately of the difference between papers that were secret and full of their own weight, and the lightness of free paper that you could throw away without any concern larger than that you might not be totally tidy (903).

perspective that Mailer offers is not reducible to the promotion of the universal maxim that “openness is good and secrecy is bad,” that K.G. Robertson ascribes to the more “normative” elements of that tradition (9). Nowhere in *Harlot's Ghost* does Mailer insist that state secrecy is, in every case, an illegitimate and insidious enemy of the interests of liberal democracy. What is insistent, however, is Mailer's determined effort to represent the banal bureaucratic details underlying the clandestine fantasy world of intelligence agencies in order to provide his readers with a vantage point, somewhere between “those separate playhouses of paranoia and cynicism” that Harlot mentions in his High Thursday lectures, from which to engage and consider the challenges and ambiguities that the “culture of secrecy” and the need for “sinister bureaucracies” like the CIA, continue to pose to American liberal democracy.

#### “Clear Sighted” and “Reasonable”: *Libra* as a Response to the Politics of Conspiracy

Much has been written about the theme of conspiracy and paranoia in the work of Don DeLillo, a writer who has been famously described by one critic as the “chief shaman of the paranoid school of fiction,” though DeLillo himself has resisted the characterization of his work as paranoid, arguing that his fiction is simply informed by the “suspicion and distrust and fear” that he senses in the world around him (Towers 6; DeCurtis 66). DeLillo claims that, rather than paranoid, his fiction is in fact “clear sighted” and “reasonable,” that he is “a completely rational person who is simply taking what he senses all around him and using it as material” (DeCurtis 66). DeLillo's interventions in the representations of consumer culture, paranoid politics, and corporate power—“It's my idea of

myself as a writer [...] that I can enter these worlds”—are an act of citizenship, perhaps “bad citizenship”<sup>6</sup> as his more right-wing critics have accused, but nevertheless one that demonstrates a perspicacious, rather than simply paranoid, concern with the American political experience (66).

Many critics trace a direct link between what they perceive as DeLillo’s paranoid sensibility and the mode of social and political critique characteristic of his work. Patrick O’Donnell is concerned with paranoia as a “cultural symptom” of late capitalism and postmodernity and presents it as an integral part of any understanding of history and identity “conceived in the after burn of master narratives” (viii). He argues that paranoia functions as a form of recognition which DeLillo posits as “the idealized condition of knowing in the moment when identity has become multiple, virtual, and open to all the available connections,” a way of thinking that is able to at least partially represent the totality of the shifting, interconnecting, and proliferating matrices of postmodern culture and global capitalism (159). Frank Lentricchia also sees in DeLillo’s work “an effort to represent [...] culture in its totality” and a “desire to move readers to the view that the shape and fate of their culture dictates the shape and fate of the self” (2). For Lentricchia, DeLillo’s paranoia is a reasonable response to the way that the ideology of modernization, conceived in a Foucauldian sense as discursive and social systems of power, and in a Jamesonian sense as the total logic of late

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<sup>6</sup> In an article in the *Washington Post*, conservative commentator George Will famously characterized *Libra* as “an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship.” When asked to respond to Will’s comments in an interview in 1997, the year of the publication of *Underworld*, DeLillo is quoted as saying: “I don’t take it seriously, but being called a ‘bad citizen’ is a compliment to a novelist, at least in my mind. That’s exactly what we ought to do. We ought to be bad citizens. We ought to, in the sense that we’re writing against what power represents, and what the corporation dictates, and what consumer consciousness has come to mean. In that sense, if we’re bad citizens, we’re doing our job” (Remnick 48).

capitalism, presents itself only as an unrepresentable shifting web of connections and convergences. Paranoia, conceived along these lines, represents a kind of political awareness, in DeLillo's work, that struggles to map the inescapable and nebulous entanglements and networks of power that construct and discipline the self in the postmodern world.

Timothy Melley also theorizes paranoia as a response to the totalizing power of discursive and social systems, however Melley argues that contemporary American fiction's paranoid style is less a critique of the way power is exercised than an expression of the anxiety caused by the threat which poststructuralist and postmodernist re-conceptions of power and subjectivity pose to autonomy and individualism. He terms this response "agency panic," or the act of rhetorical transference which attributes the human qualities of motive or intention to systems, institutions, or organizations in order to preserve some sense of autonomous agency consistent with a liberal conception of personhood. For Melley, DeLillo's paranoid sensibility points towards a residual attachment to liberal individualism in his work, an unwillingness to abandon the comforts of liberal agency or individual identity and embrace new models of subjectivity and human action. Paranoia, for Melley, is representative of the conflict occurring within postmodern narratives that are reluctant to "abandon the coherent, liberal subject" and embrace a subject re-imagined in relation to a systemic rather than centralized understanding of power (41-42).

According to O'Donnell, Lentricchia and others, DeLillo's paranoia is best understood as a mode of ideological critique, a method of revealing an important but increasingly illusive dimension of the multiple and stratified relationships

between cultural, social, political and economic systems of power; while for Melley, DeLillo's paranoia functions as a way of re-asserting, and even amplifying, the agency and autonomy of subjectivity in a post-human world that has "exploded the assumptions of liberal individualism" (14). At best a rhetorical gesture of ideological unmasking, the result of DeLillo's attempt to describe the unrepresentable intersections of corporate capitalism, the security state, and consumer culture, and at worst, the narrative ghost of the dying myth of individualism, the effect of a rhetorical defense mechanism triggered to preserve a masculinist, neo-liberal, and antisocial view of selfhood, paranoia in DeLillo's work is often characterized as symptomatic of the conflict between an understanding of human agency made meaningful only when expressed in terms of historical determinism, epistemological certainty, and ideological coherence, and a production of subjectivity dislocated and situated in relation to historical contingency, epistemological uncertainty, and radical skepticism.

Both O'Donnell's sympathetic socio-symbolic and Melley's less-sympathetic socio-psychological readings deal with paranoia in DeLillo's work on an abstract and largely epistemological level, interpreting it as a symptom of a crisis of identity or subjectivity within postmodern circumstances. Alongside these perspectives, I believe that there is a sense in which paranoia and conspiracy in DeLillo's work can be read as an articulation of a persevering populist political sensibility in America. DeLillo recognizes that the exaggerated levels of anxiety and suspiciousness in contemporary America represent a quite reasonable reaction to the democratic illegitimacy of the intensification and expansion of state and corporate power, particularly during the cold war era, but one whose tendency to

Gothicize, in Mark Edmondson's sense of the term, to express or narrate the experience of that power as preternatural, ubiquitous, and proof of the existence of a "vast world that serves as a dark double to the visible everyday world," often encourages popular cynicism and fatalism rather than a sense of popular political engagement (Edmondson 22).<sup>7</sup> And while this often melodramatic reaction to the mundane exercise and expansion of bureaucratic and systemic power yields some crucial insights regarding the routinization of anti-democratic and quasi-totalitarian practices within structures of state, cultural, and economic power, it ultimately, as DeLillo intimates in his work, offers no purchase or leverage on those systems, since paranoia functions, as O'Donnell tells us, largely as a mode of perceiving the monolithic networking of power rather than an effective mode of resistance to it. Resistance requires the possibility of identifying vulnerability or ambiguity in the system to which one is opposed, thus preserving some sense of agency, intention, or subjectivity capable of directing, restraining or influencing it.<sup>8</sup> Conspiracy theories often posit a world where contingency plays no part, where events are determined by forces whose power is ubiquitous, total, and invisible, and thus beyond the moral, ethical or political reach of democratic action or constraints. DeLillo's work reflects on the political and social context in which conspiracy as a mode of popular politics is no longer easily dismissed as unreasonable, but also insists on contingency as a vital element in affirming that a

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<sup>7</sup> The discussion of the connection between populism and conspiracy theory that follows is largely indebted to Mark Fenster's *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*.

<sup>8</sup> This is the democratic "problem of the political" as Sheldon Wolin identifies it: "The problem of the political is not to deny the ubiquity of power but to deny power uses that destroy common ends" (*Practice of Power* 198).

“clear sighted” response to the challenge to democratic legitimacy and agency posed by state secrecy, corporate power, and globalization remains possible.

In *Libra*, DeLillo’s fictional account of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the tension in DeLillo’s work between paranoia and contingency is managed, almost schematically, as DeLillo undermines the logic of both conspiratorial and “lone gunman” versions of the killing by bringing together two narrative lines to suggest a way of thinking about the assassination that eludes the overstated coherence of the account of events offered by both.<sup>9</sup> In *Libra*, neither conspiracy nor contingency are discounted as contributing factors in understanding the assassination, however DeLillo refuses to have his imagination of events “constrained” or “overwhelmed” by either. Like Mailer, DeLillo is forthright in discussing his fictional methodology, assuring his readers in an “Author’s Note” that what he offers in *Libra* is “a work of imagination,” that makes “no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination.” In fact, it is DeLillo’s intention that *Libra* offer its readers “refuge” from the “gloom [...] of unknowing” that perpetually surrounds the Kennedy shooting—“a way of thinking about the assassination without being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities, by the tide of speculation that widens with the years” (*Libra* Author’s Note). Also like Mailer, DeLillo asserts the novelist’s entitlement to assume the proportion of truth without claiming factuality, and seeks to “nourish our sense of reality,” while simultaneously altering and embellishing it (*Harlot’s Ghost* 1173).

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<sup>9</sup> The reading of *Libra* offered here is significantly influenced by Skip Willman’s “Traversing the Fantasies of the JFK Assassination: Conspiracy and Contingency in Don DeLillo’s *Libra*” in which he argues that DeLillo formulates “the JFK assassination as the result of both conspiracy *and* contingency” (407). Where it differs from Willman’s reading is in the emphasis Willman puts on conspiracy and contingency theories as ideological explanations for the “failure of society to constitute itself as a harmonious whole” (408).



This speaks to what DeLillo has referred to as the novelist's pursuit of a "a kind of redemptive truth," the capacity of fiction to "leap across the barrier of fact" in order release our imagination from a too confining desire for certainty or a too bewildering confrontation with ambiguity (DeCurtis 48).

In *Libra*, David Ferrie, an eccentric and shadowy figure with ties to the CIA, the mob, and various clandestine political organizations, as well as a penchant for astrology and mysticism, theorizes the novel's "aspir[ation] to fill some of the blank spaces in the known record" without resorting to the causal logic of either conspiracy or contingency by invoking the presence of a quasi-metaphysical force that lies outside historical or political experience to sketch a dimension of contiguity between the conflicting approaches.

'Think of two parallel lines,' he said. 'One is the life of Lee H. Oswald. One is the conspiracy to kill the President. What bridges the space between them? What makes a connection inevitable? There is a third line. It comes of our dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self. It's not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It's a line that cuts across causality, cuts across time. It has no history that we can recognize or understand. But it forces a connection. It puts a man on the path of his destiny.' (339)

Peter Knight suggests that the "third line" which Ferrie mentions, is that level at which "the conspiratorial has become inseparable from the coincidental, or more accurately," as he qualifies, the point at which "we need to read coincidences *as if* they were signs of a conspiracy, without necessarily equating the two" (*Conspiracy Culture* 108). His reading is persuasive, and there is little doubt that DeLillo's novel insists on blurring the line between accident and intention in history, but it is unclear how Knight's interpretation would deal with the notion suggested in Ferrie's remarks that what connects conspiracy and contingency,



Oswald to the plot of renegade CIA agents, the lone gunman of the Warren Commission to the paranoid sensibilities of conspiracy theory, “comes of our dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self.” Knight offers the notion of “coincidence as a realm between simple conspiracy and contingency,” but insists on coincidence as merely a kind of signification, a position that seems to dismiss DeLillo’s appeal to the deep self as a source of connection (260). This is, of course, not to suggest that Knight is incorrect in insisting on DeLillo’s willingness to question historical explanations which are based on either causal or contingent meta-narratives of history, however, as Paul Maltby points out, “*Libra* is neither consistently nor unequivocally postmodern,” and it is important to keep in mind how *Libra* “appeals to the truth and sovereignty of ‘the deepest levels of the self’,” to the trans-historical forces whose invocations Paul Maltby calls DeLillo’s Romantic metaphysics, when considering the kind of social or political critique characteristic of DeLillo’s work (Maltby 510).

What DeLillo asserts in *Libra* is a way of thinking about the assassination that seeks its veracity and impact in its appeal to the imagination, to those insights and intuitions that connect, as Ferrie says in the novel, “on some deeper plane” (*Libra* 330). Neither a theory of conspiracy nor a theory of contingency, the “third line” is DeLillo’s metaphor for an impression of truth that resides, “outside politics” and “outside history,” but deep in the psyche of “the idiosyncratic self” (DeCurtis 289; DeLillo, “Power” 5). DeLillo objects to both the conspiracy and contingency version of the assassination not because they are irrelevant or foundationless, but because they are necessarily incomplete in their attempts to account for the unfolding of events systematically—leaving no room for the

deeper ambiguities of human desire and belief. In *Libra*, both conspiracy and contingency are integral ingredients of an event which DeLillo depicts as carrying such significance and magnitude that it challenges the circumscriptions of people's sense of reality, forcing people to become "more aware of elements like randomness and ambiguity and chaos" in everyday life (DeCurtis 48). It is commonplace among DeLillo's critics to refer to the passage in *Libra* in which the assassination is described by Nicholas Branch, an ex-CIA researcher who is working on a secret history of the assassination, as "an aberration in the heartland of the real" in reference to DeLillo's statement in an interview regarding the fissure he detects in the American psyche, a lost "sense of a manageable reality," that can be "traced to that one moment in Dallas" (*Libra* 15; DeCurtis 48). Just as important, however, are Branch's comments regarding the aura of the assassination, a quality that Branch describes as "a strangeness [...] that is almost holy" (*Libra* 15). "Aberration," according to the *OED*, can mean both "a deviation from what is normal," and "a [...] moral lapse," one definition adopting the tone of an empirical observation, while the other imbues the term with metaphysical significance. Speaking of the assassination as an "aberration" preserves the sense of the event as a disruption of a legitimate and accustomed state of affairs by an act of random violence, an interpretation that while conceding the vulnerability of American life and institutions to the forces of irrationality and "an addled individual's inner turmoil," to borrow a phrase from George Will, dismisses the popularity of conspiracy theories of the assassination as the product of a general psychological need for a less disconcertingly random explanation of Kennedy's death (Will 57). However, it also communicates a sense of the assassination as a

sign of America's moral decline and fall from grace, the notion that Kennedy's murder reveals elements underlying American life and experience that reach well beyond the issues surrounding Oswald's guilt or the questions of conspiracy into issues concerning faith, communal values, and intimations of lost virtue<sup>10</sup>.

The ground DeLillo is treading here seems familiar enough. Tony Tanner reminds us that DeLillo is working in a furrow well-labored by Thomas Pynchon, positing and oscillating between "two dominant states of mind—paranoia and anti-paranoia, [...] shifting from a seething bland of unmeaning to the sinister apparent legibility of an unconsoling labyrinthine pattern or plot" (Tanner 210)<sup>11</sup>. This seems to sum up the dilemma in which Nicholas Branch finds himself in *Libra*, unable to risk interpreting the evidence he has spent three decades collecting regarding the assassination for fear that he might be guilty of distorting, misrepresenting, or even fabricating the real meaning of the event. Branch is overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of related material and evidence he has collected, and his choice seems to lie between giving-up his search for the truth or giving-in to paranoia, to either "despair of ever getting to the end," or accept "the powerful and lasting light, exposing patterns and links" which the assassination appears to emit (57-58). For Knight, and others, Branch's situation is

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<sup>10</sup> A more straight-forward expression of this notion is Christopher Lasch's observation that for many, "Speculation about the assassination [...] came to hinge not on the question of whether Oswald could have murdered Kennedy unassisted but on the seemingly much larger, momentous question of what his action revealed about the national psyche. The question so often raised in the hours following the assassination—"What have we come to?"—prompted an orgy of national soul-searching" (470).

<sup>11</sup> The exemplary passage from Pynchon, which Tanner quotes in this regard, is from *The Crying of Lot 49*: "Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy of America, or there was just America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia" (*Lot 49* 126).

representative of an epistemological crisis, a particular condition of consciousness that “is very much in tune with a postmodern distrust of final narrative solutions” (*Conspiracy Culture* 116). His anxiety and paralyzing uncertainty—“He concedes everything. He questions everything, including the basic suppositions we make about our world [...] solid objects and ordinary sounds, and our ability [...] to see things as they are, recall them clearly, be able to say what happened”—is, for Knight, a result of his never-ending search for closure, his perpetual pursuit of a narrative in which to encompass the “endless suggestiveness” of facts, to contain the seemingly infinite patterns, connections, and symmetries that the evidence seems to present (DeLillo, *Libra* 300-301). In Knight’s interpretation, “*Libra* embraces the possibility that closure and certainty are no more than convenient fictions” (*Conspiracy Culture* 109). This is, undoubtedly, a valid point and skepticism and nervousness regarding narrative is a consistent characteristic of DeLillo’s work. Branch’s dilemma, his perpetual paralysis stemming from the disparity between his desire for closure and the endless suggestiveness of the facts is, for Knight, indicative of the postmodern incredulity towards narrative—“In effect it makes Nicholas Branches of us all” (109). However, to safeguard the consistency of DeLillo’s postmodern sensibility Knight feels it necessary to characterize as “somewhat disingenuous” DeLillo’s claims that narrative “rescues history from its confusions,” and has the potential to provide a form of “redemptive truth”(109).

Timothy Melley agrees with Knight that Branch “finds himself in an epistemological crisis,” overwhelmed by the immense volume of evidence regarding the assassination to the point where “he is unable to produce his history”

(Melley 139). Branch's problem, as Melley sees it, is not only that he is unable to determinately solve the historical case, "but that the production and management of documents overrides the interpretive impulse that justifies gathering those documents in the first place" (139). In other words, Branch has, in effect, abandoned any effort to produce a coherent history of the assassination, and adopts what Melley identifies as an "archeological" approach to the case, a methodology that replaces the work of historical interpretation with the collection and organization of artifacts, the amassing of materials and documents which generate their own series of links and connections. For Melley, Branch's dilemma is largely historiographical, he is stuck between his obsession with accumulating evidence, and his lingering desire to produce an historical narrative that interprets it, a desire that Melley points to as a symptom of "agency panic." Melley finds this "methodological boundary" an interesting one because it seems to demarcate the territory shared by the interpretive impulse of "traditional historiography" and what is generally understood as paranoia (141). However, what Melley and Knight seem to discount are the insights which Branch is able to glean from his stubborn efforts to interpret the evidence, insights which affirm the worth and significance of his narrative project, and the interpretive desires which continue to haunt it, despite his recognition that any final narrative of intention, determination, or coherence which he might construct from the historical evidence of the assassination would be incomplete and distorting, as much a product of his own ordering consciousness and imagination as an objective reflection of the facts.

One such insight regards the essential flaw of conspiracy theories, their inability to account for the contingent elements of chance and coincidence that, Branch believes, played a vital role in the assassination.

If we are on the outside, we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme. Silent nameless men with unadorned hearts. A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not. It's the inside game, cold, sure, undistracted, forever closed off to us. We are the flawed ones, the innocents, trying to make some rough sense of the daily jostle. Conspirators have a logic and a daring beyond our reach. All conspiracies are the same taut story of men who find coherence in some criminal act.

But maybe not. Nicholas Branch thinks he knows better. He has learned enough about the days and months preceding November 22, and enough about the twenty-second itself, to reach a determination that the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance. Deft men and fools, ambivalence and fixed will and what the weather was like. (*Libra* 441)

Such a provisional conclusion, while not venturing another “gleaming theory, supportable, assured,” does have the effect of undermining the notion of the assassination as the result of a monolithic and masterful conspiracy. It suggests a way of thinking about the assassination that allows for the popular skepticism surrounding the version of events offered by the Warren Commission without accepting the totalizing logic of conspiracy theory. In effect, this “rescues” the suspiciousness and distrust of authority that characterizes much of the tone of that skepticism from the need to “invent the grand and masterful scheme” which defines what Richard Hofstadter calls the “paranoid style of politics” (*Libra* 58). “There is,” Branch tells us, “enough mystery in the facts as we know them, enough of conspiracy, coincidence, loose ends, dead ends, multiple interpretations,” to suggest that popular skepticism regarding the “lone gunman” theory of the Warren Commission is more than the product of mass irrationality or, as many

commentators on the popularity of conspiratorial explanations of the assassination argue, the result of a general “desire to deny the existential horror of Kennedy’s death by reducing it to a plot” (*Libra* 58; Lasch 473).

It also, as Skip Willman points out, undermines the conception of the CIA as “the ‘invisible Master’ of the geopolitical sphere,” a fantasy embraced by the conspiratorial imagination and often encouraged by elements of the CIA itself, while also calling attention to the extent to which the culture of secrecy that characterized the way the CIA operated during the cold war, had a dangerous and corrosive effect on the legitimacy of state and governmental institutions, particularly regarding the CIA’s efforts to shield itself from mechanisms of democratic oversight and restraint (414). The CIA’s obsession with secrecy, in *Libra*, does not reflect its mastery of events or control over history, but rather has the more mundane and bureaucratic function of providing the CIA with a layer of protection and obfuscation, shielding its activities from the scrutiny and control of the larger democratic system.<sup>12</sup> In *Libra*, as the following passage describing the CIA’s plans regarding the Bay of Pigs invasion indicates, the secrecy that characterizes the CIA can be viewed as largely a matter of bureaucratic and systemic routine, a way of avoiding responsibility, accountability, and administrative rivalry:

Knowledge was a danger, ignorance a cherished asset. In many cases the DCI, the Director of Central Intelligence, was not to know important things. The less he knew, the more decisively he could function. It would impair his ability to tell the truth at an inquiry or a hearing, or in the Oval office chat with the President, if he knew

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<sup>12</sup> Bill Millard, in his essay “The Fable of the Ants,” argues that in the national security state as it is depicted by DeLillo, the “deliberately fragmented bureaucracy” that is “the form of rationality peculiar to such organizations [CIA] depends precisely on minimizing the possibility that anyone might know enough to comprehend the full narrative” (218).



what they were doing [...]. The Joint Chiefs were not to know. [...]. The Secretaries were to be insulated from knowing [...]. The Deputy Secretaries were interested in drifts and tendencies. They expected to be misled. The Attorney General wasn't to know the queasy details [...]. The White House was to be the summit of unknowing [...] the system operated as an insulating muse. Let him see the softer tones. Shield him from responsibility. Secrets build their own networks, Win believed. The system would perpetuate itself in all its curious and obsessive webbing, its equivocations and patient riddles and levels of delusional thought. (21-22)

The routinization of secrecy by the CIA is, for DeLillo, more an indication of a lack of absolute power, or an illusion of absolute control, than a confirmation of its status as a plenipotentiary of an omnipotent invisible government. Everett's plan to stage an assassination attempt on JFK in order to implicate pro-Castro elements in America, and thereby frustrate moves within the American government to improve relations with Cuba, ultimately breaks down because he cannot control the proliferation of contiguous secret plots, networks, and individual motives with which it overlaps, or, to use DeLillo's own image, the original conspiracy "grow[s] tentacles" (Begley 331). Like Mailer's depiction of the CIA in *Harlot's Ghost*, DeLillo's CIA in *Libra* is more "sinister bureaucracy" than "invisible government," whose technocratic habit of secrecy is more indicative of an illusion of control than a means for determining the unfolding of events.<sup>13</sup>

Nicholas Branch seems to understand the bureaucratic nature of the CIA and its culture of secrecy. His time in the agency, we are told, provided him with insight into the essentially insignificant and frivolous nature of much of its vast collection of secrets.

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<sup>13</sup> Skip Willman calls attention to this aspect of the novel, arguing that "the 'secret parallel power' that DeLillo deconstructs in *Libra* is the CIA," pointing out that "Everett is exposed [...] as an imposter, an 'invisible Master' who fails in his conspiratorial efforts" (411-412).



Before his retirement, Branch analyzed intelligence, sought patterns in random scads of data. He believed secrets were childish things. He was not generally impressed by the accomplishments of men in the clandestine service, the spy handlers, the covert-action staff. He thought they'd built a vast theology, a formal coded body of knowledge that was basically play material, secret-keeping, one of the keener pleasures and conflicts of childhood. (442)

And yet Branch is paralyzed by the notion that the CIA is withholding vital information from him in an effort to protect "something very much like its identity—protecting its own truth, its theology of secrets" (442). For DeLillo, the structural identity of the CIA, its understanding of itself and, more importantly, of its power, is anchored in its worship of secrecy, its ability to collect and control information. Branch is "disheartened, almost immobilized" by the thought that "there's something they aren't telling him" (442-444). His belief that, as Mark Osteen puts it, "the most essential information is always that which nobody shares," keeps him trapped in his room, convinced that the key evidence that will finally allow him to "master the data" is being kept from him (Osteen 153; *Libra* 442). With Branch, DeLillo is dramatizing a general feeling of powerlessness, a nagging sense of uncertainty and suspiciousness that is the result of both being overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of information that is collected and retained by modern information systems, and a cultural and political imagination that worships secrecy, that defines power as the ability to retain and control knowledge.<sup>14</sup> To Branch, the CIA appears to possess an unlimited supply of information with which to provide him, most of which, when collected, constitutes nothing more than "a

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<sup>14</sup> "What good is knowledge," asks a character in DeLillo's *White Noise*, "if it just floats in the air? It goes from computer to computer. It changes and grows every second of every day. But nobody knows anything" (148-149). The glut of information supplied and managed by advancements in information technology, as Neil Postman has pointed out, is a primary source of the "breakdown of psychic tranquility and social purpose" in contemporary America (72). In the service of government agencies, bureaucracies, and corporations, as John Ralston Saul says, "the factual snow job is one of the great inventions of the late twentieth century" (*Voltaire's Bastards* 288).

ruined city of trivia,” but the sheer amount of data which the CIA controls also means an unlimited capacity to keep information from him, a capacity to keep him in his little room forever wondering, “What are they holding back? How much more is there?” (442). Ultimately, the central question troubling Branch about the CIA is not whether there is a motive force behind the organization that consciously wants to deny him from ever learning the truth about the assassination, but rather whether the structural and bureaucratic nature of the CIA makes full disclosure a systemic impossibility, whether there might not be “some limit inherent in the yielding of information gathered in secret” (442).

For DeLillo, the rapid advancements made in science and technology, particularly information technology that developed after World War II, and the emergence of the cold war “security state,” particularly the expansion of state intelligence agencies like the CIA and FBI, brought about what he calls in an article published in *Rolling Stone*, a “clandestine mentality” in America. This “clandestine mentality,” the individual and collective obsession with secrecy and the control of information reflects a central characteristic of the bureaucratic age, the way that rationalized administrative structures accumulate, organize, and withhold information in their struggle for, and exercise of, power. Secrecy, as one of the keys to the exercise of modern power, becomes completely affiliated with the systems and structures that control and collect information. According to DeLillo, “in an era of massive codification and storage of data, we are all keepers and yielders of secrets” (“American Blood” 27). Branch, as an exemplar of this mentality, conflates the structural and bureaucratic obsession with secrecy with the deeper mysteries of human experience and motivation, with the human desire for

recognition, a sense of belonging, community, and individuality. In this regard, as a keeper and yielder of secrets—he is after all working for the CIA and writing a secret history of the assassination—he seems obsessed with excavating the “secrets” underlying the assassination in the compendium of facts and information which he continues to collect, rather than concerning himself with the deeper understanding which his research reveals regarding the pervasiveness of alienation, desperation, loneliness, and social division in America.

The illuminating glimpse which the assassination offers under the surface of the American “heartland of the real” revolves, in *Libra*, around the figure of Lee Harvey Oswald and his conception of himself as “a zero in the system” (*Libra* 357). Oswald’s frustrated desire to “sense a structure that includes him, a definition clear enough to specify where he belongs,” seems to confirm the picture of him as an alienated and antisocial individual whose act of random violence, however historically significant, was simply a reflection of personal psychological frustrations and anxieties (357). As Branch discovers, however, Oswald’s story is too suggestive of the anxiety, frustration, and estrangement that pervades American social and cultural experience to attribute his actions to mere contingency. Though replete with errors, omissions, and questionable conclusions, Branch has, we are told, “long since forgiven the Warren Report for its failures. It is too valuable a document of human heartbreak and muddle to be scorned or dismissed” (182). DeLillo’s suggestion that Oswald’s disaffection, loneliness, and violent behavior be considered as, at least partly, a by-product of those forces that constitute American social life, rather than a deviation from them, highlight the alienating and fragmenting nature of the systems which define

cultural, political, and social experience in postwar America. Branch's research into the assassination, the years living with the loneliness, sadness, and death that he senses pervades the objects, pictures, personal stories, and state documents that he collects as evidence, convinces him that "his subject is not politics or violent crime but men in small rooms" (181). Oswald's alienation, his "life in small rooms," is, according to DeLillo, "the antithesis of the life America seems to promise its citizens: the life of consumer fulfillment" (DeCurtis 52).

The terms "citizens" and "consumer" point to central elements of the critique of social fragmentation and disconnection that DeLillo ascribes to the postmodern forms of cultural and social institutions with which his work is concerned, systems through which consumer capitalism, the technocorporatist state, and advancements in technology and information systems interweave to, in large part, circumscribe the fate of collectivities and individuals in America. Oswald is depicted as a casualty of those systems, as a citizen who finds precious little to feel connected to, or included by, in what John Schaar characterizes as a "state, economy, and society [that] are remote, huge, and thoroughly technicized and bureaucratized" (as qtd in Young 301). Alienated from the conditions that make even the degraded citizenship of consumer society available, Oswald "feels he is living at the center of an emptiness," and conceives himself "a zero in the system" (DeLillo, *Libra* 357). "Again we come back," DeLillo comments in an interview, "to these men in small rooms who can't get out and who have to organize their desperation and their loneliness, who have to give it a destiny" (DeCurtis 57-58). This then becomes the fatal force, the third line that connects the conspiracy and contingency theories of the assassination. Oswald's restless

desire for a destiny, his frustrated attempts to “merge with the world in general or with history in particular,” intensified by his social alienation and inability to identify a sense of commonality or collective identity in which he might participate, a frustration only nourished by the culture of secrecy perpetuated by the state and bureaucratic systems which surround him, and, ultimately, woven into the history of the illegitimate and undemocratic practices utilized and routinized by the American state and its agencies during the cold war, sets the stage for an event that seems, for DeLillo, to act as a “dark center” around which the paranoia, confusion, distress, mistrust, anxiety and suspicion that DeLillo perceives “in the air and in the culture” congregate.<sup>15</sup>

*Libra* never offers a clear motive for Oswald’s actions, no clear indication as to whether they were politically, emotionally, or psychologically driven. Oswald’s forays into Marxism and self-exile, in the novel, are unconvincing, and his need for belonging and recognition presented more-or-less sympathetically. Here is Larry Parmenter discussing Oswald with Ferrie:

“You mentioned politics,” he said. “How far left is this young friend of yours?”

“There is politics, there is emotion, there is psychology. I know him quite well but I wouldn’t be completely honest if I said I could pin him down, pin him right to the spot. He may be a pure Marxist, the purest of believers. Or he may be an actor in real life. What I know with absolute certainty is that he’s poor, he’s dreadfully, grindingly poor. (*Libra* 56)

DeLillo highlights the inescapable social and economic division that Oswald represents in the novel, but as for ascribing a motive DeLillo’s working model seems to be the one attributed to Parmenter by his wife Beryl:

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<sup>15</sup> In an interview, DeLillo tells Anthony DeCurtis that, “As I was working on *Libra*, it occurred to me that a lot of tendencies in my first eight novels seemed to me to be collecting around the dark center of the assassination” (47-48).

He believed that nothing can be finally known that involves human motive and need. There is always another level, another secret, a way in which the heart breeds a deception so mysterious and complex it can only be taken for a deeper kind of truth. (*Libra* 260)

Like Win Everett, the rogue CIA agent and leader of the conspiracy, DeLillo's narrative compels us to accept "the fact that Lee Oswald existed independent of the plot," that depicting him as a patsy or as a crazed gunman writes the mystery, idiosyncrasy, and complexity of human agency and imagination—the "notion of coincidence and dream and intuition and the possible impact of astrology on the way men act"—out of the narrative of the assassination (DeCurtis 55-56). This leaves us with Oswald as a puppet constructed and controlled in the service of an all-powerful conspiracy—"He [Win Everett] felt marvelously alert, sure of himself, putting together a man with scissors and tape"—or with a conspiracism that is the product of a mass psychological drama, yet another example of the "paranoid style" in American politics (*Libra* 178). As ways of thinking about the assassination neither theory, for DeLillo, satisfactorily comes to terms with either the many ways in which Oswald functions as a "symptom" of the breakdown in the civic fabric of American life—highlighted by the failure of modern American consumer culture to provide a vigorous and attainable sense of social participation or communal vision for Oswald<sup>16</sup>—or with the crisis of democratic legitimacy—represented by the novel's interest in the expansion of the bureaucratic and technocratic structures of state and corporate institutions, the anxieties concerning

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<sup>16</sup> At one point in *Libra*, after watching *Suddenly*, a Frank Sinatra movie about a combat veteran who plots to assassinate the president, Oswald contemplates the answer to his sense of alienation and frustration offered by consumer society: "He would start saving right away for a washing machine and car. They'd get an apartment with a balcony, their own furniture for a change, modern pieces, sleek and clean. These are standard ways to stop being alone" (371).

privacy which advancements in technology generate,<sup>17</sup> and the entrenchment of a “culture of secrecy” that makes the suspicions and questions raised by conspiracy theories of the assassination so compelling and reasonable to the popular political imagination.

Dramatizing the Kennedy assassination as the product of conspiracy, contingency, and Oswald’s frustrated yearning for a destiny, of forces socio-political, historical, and metaphysical, is most certainly a response to those for whom conspiracy theories regarding the assassination are little more than psychological fantasies concocted by the masses in reaction to the stress and anxiety left in the wake of what they construe as Oswald’s act of derangement. Such explanations do little justice to the feelings of discontent, mistrust of authority, political disengagement, and skepticism regarding political institutions that often link conspiratorial explanations of the assassination with populist critiques of power, official secrecy, and elitism. DeLillo also responds to conspiracy theory’s tendency to misrepresent the singularity and coherence of the forces behind historical events, the way that totalizing narratives leave little room for the complicating presence of contingency, human longing, and their own attraction to a pessimistic and Gothic sensibility, a point which we will explore further in relation to *Underworld*.<sup>18</sup> This approach takes advantage of the standing

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<sup>17</sup> In *Libra*, Win Everett contemplates the significance of advancements in surveillance technology: “Spy planes, drone aircraft, satellites with cameras that can see from three hundred miles what you can see from a hundred feet. They see and hear. [...] I’ll tell you what it means, these orbiting sensors that can hear us in our beds. It means the end of loyalty. The more complex the systems, the less conviction in people. Conviction will be drained out of us. Devices will drain us, make us vague and pliant” (77).

<sup>18</sup> In many ways, DeLillo’s project seems similar to the one discussed by Mark Fenster: “Linking a progressive critique that recognizes the structural inequities of economic, political, and cultural power to a focus on cultural practices makes possible an analysis that recognizes the political and cultural role of conspiracy theory in popular conceptions of power, noting both their ideological



invitation that conspiracy theories regarding the assassination offer for a critique of the systemic intensification of power that accompanies the expansion of state and corporatist structures and postmodern technological and cultural production, while maintaining a credible voice of opposition and resistance to that power by insisting on a counterforce which exists alongside the contingent and systemic forces of history. For DeLillo, that counterforce is a manifestation of the yearning for transcendence that resides in the visions, dreams, intuitions, and other intimations of the deep self, those elements of the life of the individual imagination capable of envisioning possibilities, personal and political, outside of those circumscribed by the power of systems and institutions.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, it is also capable of envisioning a fate circumscribed by “the movement or the configuration of the stars, which is one reason the book is called *Libra*” (DeCurtis 55-56).

### “Nothing you can believe is not coming true”: *Underworld* and the End of the Cold War Gothic

The assertion which critic Michael Wood makes, that *Libra* is the last good novel of “the great age of American paranoia,” and *Underworld* an initiation into the age of the post-paranoid novel, would appear to be based around the notion that with the end of the cold war and its attendant apocalyptic anxieties and pathological suspiciousness, paranoia and conspiracy have lost much of their

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misrepresentations and their nascent desire for a politics in which ‘the people’ can affectively and effectively engage” (Fenster 62).

<sup>19</sup> Besides Paul Maltby, other critics who have emphasized DeLillo’s tendency to “endorse his characters’ beliefs in transcendent realities” rather than dismiss them include John McClure and Mark Osteen (Maltby 510). Mark Osteen, in particular, discusses DeLillo’s exploration of “the myriad magical antidotes to postmodern dread” which, even when they fail, “provide glimpses of a potentially transcendent realm” (3).

political and cultural currency in America. However, as Wood makes clear in his review of *Underworld*, in the post-cold war world as DeLillo portrays it, paranoid politics and conspiracy theories have become, not so much antiquated, as reconfigured to suit a new age, an age in which fears and anxieties concerning nuclear holocaust and communist spies now appear rather quaint and suitably nostalgic. Where *Harlot's Ghost* and *Libra* could root their interest in conspiracy theories and secret plots in the clandestine practices and secrecy fetishism of the cold war CIA and the popular skepticism surrounding the less than convincing official government explanation offered for the assassination of JFK, the suspiciousness, anxiety, and paranoia that floats through the pages of *Underworld* is less bound to a particular event or gap in the historical record, giving it an all-together more diffuse, indefinite, and uncertain quality. Wood attributes this to a rather perverse mourning period which he believes is bound to follow an age replete with conspiracy and secrecy—"those paranoid habits," DeLillo seems to be saying in *Underworld*, "are hard to shake" (Wood 3). However, the sense which *Underworld* seems to communicate is not just that paranoia and conspiracy are winding-down, being flattened-out and divested of their political potency by their absorption into mainstream consumer culture—the scene in the "Conspiracy Theory Café" comes immediately to mind—but also that new modes are emerging, styles and forms of paranoia and conspiracy suitable to encounter the fears and anxieties in a world dominated by the forces of global capitalism rather than the ideologies of cold war politics.

Many critics have pointed to the revised tone of paranoia adopted in *Underworld*, marking a shift, not just in DeLillo's work, but also in cultural and

political attitudes towards conspiracy theories in general in post-cold war America. Peter Knight, in particular, provides an account of what he calls the “broad shift from secure to insecure paranoia” dramatized in *Underworld* (“Everything is Connected” 823). “Secure paranoia,” as Knight defines it, is the paranoia characteristic of the cold war age, the anxiety produced by the threat of nuclear war, the impositions on personal freedoms and state violations of individual rights justified in the name of containment, and the ideological politics of anti-communism and militarism. It is labeled “secure paranoia” by Knight in comparison to the “insecure paranoia” which, as Knight argues, “DeLillo presents as an effect of the Kennedy assassination’s effects,” a degree and depth of uncertainty which, in retrospect, makes the “paranoia of the cold war years take on a comforting solidity” (*Conspiracy Culture* 229). This, for Knight, accounts for the rather nostalgic attitude that many of DeLillo’s characters in *Underworld* seem to hold towards the cold war. Prominent amongst these cold war sentimentalists is Klara Sax, an artist whose latest project includes the repainting of disused B52’s. Discussing her work with a French journalist she offers the following assessment of the shifting nature of power in the post-cold war world:

Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. It was greatness, danger, terror, all those things. And it held us together, the Soviets and us. Maybe it held the world together. You could measure things. You could measure hope and you could measure destruction. Not that I want to bring it back. It’s gone, good riddance. But the fact is.  
(*Underworld*, 76)

Underlying Klara’s curious nostalgia for the days of Mutually Assured Destruction is a sense that despite the fears and anxieties of living under the shadow of the Bomb, the cold war provided a sense of commonality and nationhood rooted in the

profound shared experience of, as J. Edgar Hoover puts it in the prologue to the novel, “sitting in the furrow of destruction” (28). This, of course, rehearses the notion that the circumstances of the cold war provided America with a renewed sense of national identity and purpose, a broad cold war consensus that served the political and economic interests and designs of the forces of conformity.

Underlying Klara’s comments is the recognition that with the onset of the cold war the often-strained fibers connecting the fate of the individual to the common fate of the nation in America became intensified, the story of individual hopes and fears for the future largely subsumed by the apocalyptic anxieties and paranoia of the nuclear age.

This notion is perhaps best summed up in the novel by the comedian Lenny Bruce, who during the Cuban missile crisis, adopts the line “We’re all gonna die!” as part of his routine. We are told that, “Lenny loves the postexistentialist bent of this line,” because in it “the audience can hear the obliteration of the idea of uniqueness and free choice. They can hear the replacement of human isolation by massive and unvaried ruin” (507). Like Klara, Lenny respects the capacity of the bomb to speak to a yearning for transcendence in the individual, to displace the alienation and fragmentation of modern life with a sense of being connected, by the dangerous presence of an all-powerful force, to a common historical destiny. Lenny opens his routine by saying “Good evening, my fellow citizens,” parodying the opening line of President Kennedy’s address to the nation and layering with dark irony the solidification of national identity under the threat of nuclear annihilation. Of course true to form in DeLillo’s work, Lenny’s response to Kennedy’s “grim speech” also exhibits elements of conspiracy theory—

“Powerless. Understand, this is how they remind us of our basic state. They roll out a periodic crisis. [...] You know what this is? This is twenty-six guys from Harvard deciding our fate” (505-507). In Lenny’s sardonic response to the Cuban missile crisis DeLillo teases out the paradoxical nature of cold war paranoia—the fear of nuclear conflict as a form of both anxiety and stability, as a source of both individual tension and national communion.

It is a paradox also postulated in the novel by Marvin Lundy as he explains to Brian Glassic how his nostalgia for classic cars—“You look at old cars and recall a purpose, a destination”—is related to the winding down of the cold war:

You need the leaders of both sides to keep the cold war going. It’s the one constant thing. It’s honest, it’s dependable. Because when the tension and rivalry come to an end, that’s when your worst nightmares begin. All the power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal bloodstream. You will no longer be the main [...] point of reference. Because other forces will come rushing in, demanding and challenging. (170)

DeLillo looks back on the cold war in *Underworld*, and finds not just a source of anxiety, distress, and dread, though certainly that, but also a framework within which those fears had been managed, a sense that the forces capable of shaping the individual and common fate while terrible and powerful, were still subject to control and containment, still a matter of competing ideologies, governments, military interests, foreign policies, and national identities. Power during the cold war, for DeLillo, was still thought largely definable, exercised by institutions, states, and leaders, even if often in a manner both elitist and clandestine. From DeLillo’s post-cold war perspective, where power seems to be becoming ever more amorphous and indiscernible, the old points of reference—the state, political leaders, and government agencies—no longer appear to exert control or even

influence over the forces which circumscribe the fate of the individual and society. For DeLillo, the bipolar rivalry of the cold war nuclear standoff functioned in retrospect as a kind of gauge for the anxieties and fears of everyday life, a state of tension that seemed to impose ultimate borders, real and metaphoric, on the reach and exercise of power and its instruments. Here again is Klara Sax:

Many things that were anchored to the balance of power and the balance of terror seem to be undone, unstuck. Things have no limits now. Money has no limits. I don't understand money anymore. Money is undone. Violence is undone, violence is easier now, it's uprooted, out of control, it has no measure anymore, it has no level of values. (76)

Besides money and violence, DeLillo's novel seems keen, as the above passages intimate, to add paranoia to Klara's list of things unstuck by the end of the cold war. No longer tethered to the atomic-age fears of nuclear conflict and secret government plots, to the bygone era of cold war America now bathed in a nostalgic light, DeLillo turns his attention to new modes of paranoia in America, to an emerging nightmare vision of forces and systems of power that seem to function beyond containment, beyond control, and even beyond resistance. *Underworld* portrays a world haunted by massive systems of power whose ubiquity, diffusiveness and almost invisible menace seem to acquire an almost preternatural and spectral potency. In this world paranoia and conspiracy theories can only hint at the insidious and invisible forces and systems that determine and shape it, raising ambiguous fears and self-reflexive paranoia consistent with what Mark Edmundson in his book *Nightmare on Main Street* describes as the culture of Gothic pessimism. It is a culture replete with a kind of "religion of skeptical response" and political cynicism, a pessimistic sensibility combined with the

conviction that “nothing you can believe is not coming true” (*Underworld* 314; 802).<sup>20</sup> In *Underworld*, DeLillo enters this Gothic realm, portraying its shifting dominant anxieties and fears, but also acknowledging those forces that demonstrate a potential to act as a counter to those anxieties, to offer contesting visions and voices.

### “This is when your worst nightmare begins”

The Gothic sensibility invoked by DeLillo in *Underworld* is perhaps most obvious in his use of Gothic and medieval imagery. In *Underworld*, we “make our way through the world and come upon a scene that is medieval-modern,” and are given a vision of a suburban condom shop at the center of a satellite city that is “like some medieval town with the castle smack at the center” (104; 109). We are shown a “gothic cathedral of pork,” and introduced to a character who uses his “head as an instrument of medieval siege” (214; 338). A child’s game of “tag” intimates “something old and dank, some medieval awe,” and a fancy dress party is attended by woman in “modified medieval dress” (678; 574). The Gothic qualities of New York, aka Gotham, in particular are emphasized with its “medieval turrets in the distance,” and its streets which, at different points, take on “a late medieval,” and later simply “a medieval,” texture (380; 391; 494). In the South Bronx, as we are told, nuns in their habits and friars in their robes are a “natural sight,” since “what figures could be so timely, costumed for rats and plague?” (240). And there is the motif of Peter Bruegel’s 16<sup>th</sup> century painting

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<sup>20</sup> Edmundson writes that, “contemporary Gothic is often an exercise in what we might call the reductive fallacy, the conviction that the worst truth that you can come up with about any person or event is the most consequential truth” (67).



*The Triumph of Death*, which, as a reproduction torn out of, inevitably, *Life* magazine and thrown towards the field at a baseball game, floats down into the hands of J. Edgar Hoover in the opening scenes of the novel. Also later, when recalling a police photo of Lenny Bruce's dead body, J. Edgar Hoover deems the picture to be an appropriate image of a "hellish sense of religious retribution out of the Middle Ages" (574).<sup>21</sup>

There is also, consistent with the Gothic mode, a threatening and terrifying agency haunting the novel, or I should say two, twin forces of apocalypse whose ultimate conjoining in the novel's epilogue represents the apotheosis of the paranoid consciousness—a summary image demonstrating that "everything is connected," which is a phrase repeated so often in the novel that it seems to constitute a kind of mantra. The first threatening presence is, of course, the Bomb. Casting its shadow over the whole of the novel, the Bomb is "the force in the world [...] that displaces religious faith with paranoia," a faith that replaces God with radioactivity, the power of alpha particles and the all-knowing systems that shape them, the endless fitted links" (241; 251). The invention of the Bomb, for DeLillo, transferred the power and mystery characteristic of the mystical realm to

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<sup>21</sup> DeLillo's many references to Bruegel's painting could be said to indicate an interest in the "affinities between narrative and pictorial art" that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick tells us is an identifiable characteristic of the Gothic novel. Other elements of Sedgwick's influential catalogue of the Gothic novel's preoccupations which are present in *Underworld* are represented by the attention it pays to: "the priesthood and monastic institutions" (Nick spends time in a reform school run by priests, talks of his interest in a book written by an anonymous mystic and given to him by a priest, and one of the major characters Sister Edgar is a nun); "subterranean spaces and live burial" (the implication of the novel's title is the driving of American life metaphorically underground by the threat of nuclear war, an image extended throughout the novel and particularly by a scene which takes place after the end of the cold war in which people emerge from subway gratings escaping a fire underground); "doubles" (the doppelganger motif traced in the names of Edgar Hoover and Sister Edgar, the constant doubling of images of weapons and waste, and the appearances of coincidences regarding places and people that appear throughout the novel); and "apparitions from the past" (Matt, as a six year old, waits in the balcony of a movie theater for "the ghost or soul of his father to make a visitation" (*Underworld* 408), and Nick, Matt's brother, senses his "own ghost father" (*Underworld* 276) living in the walls of the Watts Towers (Sedgwick 10).

the technological and political context of the cold war—"The mushroom cloud was the godhead of Annihilation and Ruin," ruminates J. Edgar Hoover before a party, "The state controlled the means of apocalypse" (563). The cold war order, as DeLillo makes clear in the novel, was founded on the connection between secrecy, death, and systems, the massive networking of the security apparatus of the state, the economics of corporate capitalism, and the dark eschatology of the Bomb—a configuration that, aside from the genuine anxiety and trauma it engendered in the American psyche, created the conditions, political and metaphysical, under which conspiracy, secrecy, and paranoia could prosper.

It is one of the unavoidable consequences of the cold war, for DeLillo, that it left as part of its legacy a ripe environment for paranoia and suspicion, that it created a sense amongst people that history was no longer a public matter; that important events and decisions were, as Mark Osteen aptly puts it, "founded upon acts perpetuated in secret" (221). Hoover, in *Underworld*, foresees this consequence of the nuclear age, after being informed by his agents that the Russians had detonated a second nuclear device, effectively marking the beginning of the cold war:

There is the secret of the bomb and there are the secrets that the bomb inspires, things even the Director cannot guess—a man whose own sequestered heart holds every festering secret in the Western world—because these plots are only now evolving. This is what he knows, that the genius of the bomb is printed not only in its physics of particles and rays but in the occasion it creates for new secrets. For every atmospheric blast, every glimpse we get of the bared force of nature, that weird peeled eyeball exploding over the desert—for every one of these he reckons a hundred plots go underground, to spawn and skein. (51)

The Bomb, for DeLillo, is not just a source of anxiety and terror, but also a force that inspires a kind of secular theology of secrecy, a conviction which DeLillo describes as “the faith of suspicion and unreality” that gives shape to a popular and institutional consciousness that becomes obsessed with secrecy as the root of power and as the only defense against the dangers of a hostile and insecure world (251). The state itself, in DeLillo’s version of the cold war, is depicted as both the subject of paranoia and the paranoid subject, as one character makes clear in the novel when he advises Matt Shay that, “You can never underestimate the willingness of the state to act out its own massive fantasies,” a bit of cold war wisdom symbolically represented in the novel by both the figure of Richard Nixon, cast in the shadow of the Watergate scandal—“[Matt] thought of the photograph of Nixon and wondered if the state had taken on the paranoia of the individual or was it the other way around”—and by J. Edgar Hoover’s pathological fear of germs, a paranoia which DeLillo describes as a fear of “contagion” and “infiltration,” a rather obvious metaphoric reference to the anti-communist paranoia of the McCarthy years and to Hoover’s secret personal FBI files which he gathered on celebrities and political activists<sup>22</sup> (*Underworld* 421; 557). For DeLillo, a fundamental aspect of the national pathology wrought by the anxiety and trauma of nearly forty years of living in the shadow of nuclear destruction, and the obsession with secrecy that the cold war age engendered, is the entrenchment of what could at best be called a deep suspiciousness, and at

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<sup>22</sup> In this regard DeLillo writes: “He [Hoover] likes to be around movie idols and celebrity athletes [...] Fame and secrecy are the high and low ends of the same fascination, the static crackle of some libidinous thing in the world, and Edgar responds to people who have this energy. He wants to be their dearly devoted friend provided their hidden lives are in his private files, all the rumors collected and indexed, the shadow facts made real. (*Underworld* 17).

worst a largely justifiable skepticism and cynicism, regarding the democratic legitimacy and transparency of political institutions and authority, that remains a significant influence on the post-cold war popular American cultural and political imagination.

To put this a different way, paranoia, suspiciousness, and a general feeling of insecurity are, for DeLillo, a significant part of the residual psychic waste of the cold war, and indeed waste is the other implacable Gothic force that haunts the novel. Nick Shay, the sometimes narrator of *Underworld*, works as a public relations officer for a “waste containment” company, a business he describes in terms which mirror the reverential and mystical tones used to describe the Bomb:

My firm was involved in waste. We were waste handlers, waste traders, cosmologists of waste. I traveled to the coastal lowlands of Texas and watched men in moon suits bury drums of dangerous waste in subterranean salt beds many millions of years old, dried-out remnants of a Mesozoic ocean. It was a religious conviction in our business that these deposits of rock salt would not leak radiation. Waste is a religious thing. We entomb contaminated waste with a sense of reverence and dread. It is necessary to respect what we discard. (88)

If, for DeLillo, the Bomb is the god of war which threatens “death from the sky,” then waste, the bastard child of the union between the nuclear age and consumer capitalism, is the god which threatens death from below—“We built pyramids of waste above and below the earth. The more hazardous the waste, the deeper we tried to sink it. The word plutonium comes from Pluto, god of the dead and ruler of the underworld” (458; 106). Waste, in *Underworld*, is the Bomb’s “mystical twin,” the largely hidden but ubiquitous presence that “comes back to consume us” (791). In the residue and fallout of cold war paranoia and consumer excess DeLillo unearths an ecological mode of apocalyptic Gothic in which the terrors

and ghosts of the past continue to haunt and threaten the present—"waste is the secret history, the underhistory," suggests Viktor Maltsev, a Russian executive of a company that sells nuclear explosions as a way of destroying dangerous waste, "All those decades [...] when we thought about weapons all the time and never thought about the dark multiplying byproduct" (791). Significantly, Victor makes these remarks while positioned in what DeLillo describes as "something of a gargoyle squat" (791).

It is no surprise then to find a conventionally Gothic tale making the rounds at the waste-handling conference Nick attends in the novel, a story concerning "a spectral ship" that has been sailing from port to port for two years because no country will accept the toxic cargo it is rumored to be carrying (278). For Nick, "all these ghost-ship stories" seem a natural outgrowth of the notion, promoted by "garbage theorist" Jesse Detwiler at the conference, that "waste is the best-kept secret in the world" (281). Detwiler promotes the "ominous and magical" qualities of toxic waste, touting the mystical aura that surrounds the kind of substances that have to be isolated and buried deep in dump-sites. "The more dangerous the waste," he argues, "the more heroic it will become. Irradiated ground. The way the Indians venerate this terrain now, we'll come to see it as sacred in the next century" (289). Like the "religion of nuclearism," a morbid reverence for the secret power of the Bomb shared by J. Edgar Hoover and Sister Edgar, Detwiler is an adept of the "religion of waste," a mystical attitude toward garbage which Nick dismisses as the ramblings of a "talk-show [...] waste hustler," but which engages his interest nonetheless—"I didn't think I liked Detwiler but I liked to listen to him" (Osteen 237; *Underworld* 287; 289).

Despite Nick's recognition that the "ghost-ship" stories are little more than "elusive hearsay," and his suspicions regarding the careerist motives behind Detwiler's theorizing—"He was [...] looking for book deals and documentary films"—Nick still finds that "there is a whisper of mystical contemplation that seems totally appropriate to the subject of waste," a subject which he turns to because, as he says, "I was ready for something new, for a faith to embrace" (281; 287; 282).

Nick's attitude toward the paranoia of Detwiler's contention concerning the mysterious ship, that he can believe in its existence because, "it's easy to believe. We'd be stupid not to believe it," is telling in its ambiguity (289). Nick, like another of DeLillo's Nicks, Nicholas Branch in *Libra*, is well aware of the paranoia behind conspiracy theories, or what he terms "Dietrologica," defined by Nick as "the science of what is behind something. A suspicious event. The science of what is behind an event" (280). Agreeing with his colleague Sims that "we have real sciences, hard sciences, we don't need imaginary ones," Nick mocks the kind of "facile sentiments" and "cheap and easy delusions" that constitute the framework of a "personal conspiracy credo" (280; 336). Still, Sims seems compelled to spread the rumors of the ship and even speculate about the possibility that the ship's cargo might be CIA heroin or that the ship might be owned by organized crime, showing no hesitation in invoking two of the common bogeymen of many conventional conspiracy theories. And in a later conversation with Nick, Sims, an African American, contends that the government is deliberately underreporting the number of black people in America because "if the real number is reported, white people gonna go weak in the knees and black people gonna get

all pumped up with, Hey we oughta be getting' more of this and more of that and more of the other" (335). Nick responds to Sims' suspiciousness by recalling their previous agreement regarding conspiracy theories—"Am I right? You and I. We don't believe that what is behind an event is so organized and sinister that we have to make a science out of it" (336). When Nick describes Sims' speculations as "genuine paranoia," we are told that Sims "seemed to take pleasure in this" (336). In fact, Sims' reaction to Nick's remonstrations indicates that there is something less than genuine about Sims' paranoia, a kind of thin sheet of irony and self-reflexivity between Sims and his theories that insulates him from accusations of either naiveté or cynicism. What it fails to insulate him from, however, are America's unresolved anxieties regarding race and government secrecy, the real issues that seem to underlie Sims' paranoid speculations.

Sim's brand of conspiracy theory functions as a way for him to acknowledge his suspicions regarding the existence of secret forces and motives while never having to risk any faith or conviction in their veracity. They are stories told as much for the pleasure of the telling, and for the effect on their audience, as for their speculations concerning the nature of power and injustice in the world around him. "He liked saying this," Nick observes after listening to Sim's speculate regarding the possibility that the "ghost ship" was not only owned by their company, but that their company was controlled by the mob, "Not that he believed it. He didn't believe it for half a second but he wanted me to believe it, or entertain the thought" (280). This kind of ironic attitude toward paranoia is expressed more directly by Eric Deming, a colleague of Nick's brother Matt, who, consistent with the doubling framework of waste and the bomb in the novel, works



on weapons research at a facility nicknamed “the Pocket” in New Mexico. Eric is a devotee of rumors regarding what he calls “downwinders,” people who have suffered horrible and grotesque physical effects from the radioactive fallout produced by the testing of nuclear weapons in Nevada, incidents that are widely rumored but reported to have been “hushed up” by the government. Eric gives Matt reports of deformed children, cancer outbreaks, “ravishing” brunettes losing all their hair after washing it, and “Old Testament outbreaks of great red boils. Great big splotches and rashes. And coughing up handfuls of blood” (406). Asked by Matt whether he really thinks that such stories are true, Eric answers no and tells him that the reason he insists on spreading such rumors is “for the tone, of course [...] For the edge. The bite. The existential burn” (406).

The style of paranoia that was DeLillo’s concern in *Libra*, those conspiracy narratives that serve as an expression of the popular mistrust and suspicion toward the motives and transparency of those forces which wield power in American life, abide in *Underworld* but in a mode more cynical and equivocal, aware of its capacity to generate fear, mistrust, and anxiety but tentative and ambiguous in its representation of what to fear, who to mistrust, and the source of those anxieties. It is a mode that is fascinated with secrecy, power, and fear, a kind of conspiracy narrative which thrives on elements of tone and a cultivated cynicism, but which is ultimately highly skeptical about its own status as a critique of or engagement with recognizable or discernable structures of power. Paranoia, in *Underworld*, offers a disorientating and complicating vision of power rather than a simplified causal explanation for events and circumstances. It tunes into the popular sense that there are larger forces at work, agencies that haunt all aspects of our personal and public

worlds, forging connections and networks of power relations largely indiscernible and indeterminate beyond the suspicions that they are always present and at work. After smoking “something that had made him immobile,” Matt experiences just such a paranoid vision:

He was surrounded by enemies. Not enemies but connections, a network of things and people. Not people exactly but figures—things and figures and levels of knowledge that he was completely helpless to enter. [...] He was bent to the weight of the room, distrustful of everyone and everything here. Paranoid. Now he knew what it meant, this word that was bandied and bruited so easily, and he sensed the connections being made around him, all the objects and shaped silhouettes and levels of knowledge—not knowledge exactly but insidious intent. But not that either—some deeper meaning that existed solely to keep him from knowing what it was. (421)

Matt is troubled by a malevolent and evanescent presence whose potency and reach cannot be circumscribed by reference to “The state, the nation, the corporation, the power structure, the system, the establishment,” a catalogue of possible names offered by a young New Leftist revolutionary to Clyde Tolson, Hoover’s closest aide and confidant, at a party in 1966, for whatever powerful entity was running America (575). Matt’s vision is of a form of power that is threatening and diffuse, but which is too shadowy and phantasmagoric to allow him to determinately locate or identify it. As opposed to the young revolutionary, who looks around the room at Hoover’s party and recognizes the rich, powerful, and famous people present as “all part of the same motherfucking thing,” Matt struggles to either identify or name his antagonist (575).

The world which Matt glimpses in his drug-induced “paranoid episode,” is one in which “the limits of human perception and dread” which were redefined by the invention of the bomb, as the novel repeatedly emphasizes, have once again

been redrawn by the emergence of global capitalism. Paranoia, in *Underworld*, is recast by Matt as the state of being “systemed under,” a condition in which the merging of the warfare security state and consumer capitalism characteristic of the cold war era, when extended and intensified by the forces of globalization, produces a mode of disorientation and uncertainty that retains a potent sense of threat and fear, but for which any framework or perspective from which those forces might be confronted or resisted is rendered dubious (465). “And how can you tell the difference,” Matt wonders, “between syringes and missiles if you’ve become so pliant, ready to half believe everything and to fix conviction in nothing?” (466). In Matt’s dystopic vision of the New World Order, the forces and systems that shape and structure this new world are so complicated and sophisticated, move so rapidly and coerce so subtly, connect and network on so many different levels, that they are not only beyond the control of political entities such as nations or ideologies, but are also largely unrepresentable, able to forge connections and exert influences which reach far beyond the comprehension of even those, like Matt, who feel haunted by their presence. The emergence of global capitalism and advancements in technology that have greatly enabled its expansion have, to a large degree, dislodged the economic, political, and social frames of reference with which nations, institutions, and individuals understood the limits of the exercise of power, inspiring, in *Underworld*, nightmare visions in which one cannot “tell the difference between orange juice and agent orange [because] the same massive system connects them at levels outside your comprehension” (465).

Matt's conclusion regarding his vision, that "everything connects in the end, or only seems to, or seems to only because it does," maps with apprehension and uncertainty a world in which the forces of war and of waste, the systems created for capitalist production and those created for the production of fear and death, have completely merged, producing a network of endless connections through which a form of power functions disembodied from national, institutional, or individual limitations, and which appears to have attained, as Edmundson puts it, "capacities of motion and transformation that make it a preternatural force [...] something more potent than humanity" (465; Edmundson 42). As *Underworld* draws to a close, DeLillo offers a panorama of what Anthony Giddens has described as "a runaway world," a global market that connects across multiple frontiers at speeds largely beyond the range of people's understanding, and beyond the possibility of being effectively governed or controlled. Recounting remarks made by Viktor Maltsev, Nick holds forth, for the benefit of his friend Brian Glassic, on the paradox of the "changeover" to the global marketplace:

Some things fade and wane, states disintegrate, assembly lines shorten their runs and interact with lines in other countries. This is what desire seems to demand. A method of production that will custom-cater to cultural and personal needs, not to cold war ideologies of massive uniformity. And the system pretends to go along, to become more supple and resourceful, less dependent on rigid categories. But even as desire tends to specialize, going silky and intimate, the force of converging markets produces an instantaneous capital that shoots across horizons at the speed of light, making for a certain furtive sameness, a planing away of particulars that affects everything from architecture to leisure time to the way people eat and sleep and dream. (786)

While on the surface the "new" capitalism appears to offer a mode of production which counters the mass conformity of cold war Fordism, it in fact, according to

Maltsev, works just as intensively as a force that “burns off the nuance in a culture,” but more furtively and via a market-system which, as it produces capital that “shoots across horizons at the speed of light,” appears to operate beyond restraint or containment (786). George Soros describes this as the “dynamic disequilibrium” of global capitalism, a social, political, and economic context in which events move “too rapidly for people’s understanding, causing a gap between thinking and reality to appear” (Soros 71). The irony that pervades *Underworld*’s staging of the shifting nature of paranoia in the postwar world, is that it has become precisely those forces which link and interconnect distant realities in an ever growing network of economic, social, and cultural relations, forces which helped bring down the Berlin Wall and diminish the threat of nuclear destruction, that now intensify the atomization, disconnection, and anxiety that, for DeLillo, is the continuing legacy of the cold war. *Underworld* dramatizes a condition in which the seemingly unrestrained proliferation of connections and systemic integration that characterize the post-cold war world reproduces, in a less stable, less definable, and less coherent form the ingrained paranoia and implacable sense of foreboding which is part of the invisible psychic fallout of “the bombs [that] were not released. [...] The missiles [that] remained in the underwing carriages, unfired” (76).

“This is not surreal”

The event that begins *Underworld*, the 1951 playoff baseball game between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers, is depicted lyrically and with a definite sense of nostalgia. DeLillo partly describes the game through the

experience of a fourteen-year-old African-American boy named Cotter (DeLillo was also fourteen in 1951) whose eventual capturing of the baseball hit by Bobby Thompson for the game winning home run—later dubbed in the New York papers as “The Shot Heard ‘Round the World”—is the final link in the on-going narrative of the baseball that eludes sports memorabilia collector Marvin Lundy’s attempt to fully account for and document the veracity of the object’s history. However, as DeLillo tells us, he is also concerned with the game as what he calls “an example of some unrepeatable social phenomenon,” a mode of public experience which DeLillo believes is no longer possible in contemporary America (“Power” 3). DeLillo imbues his image of the gathering crowd with a sense of democratic possibility—“Longing on a large scale,” ventures DeLillo, “is what makes history” (11). Describing Cotter’s arrival at the stadium DeLillo writes:

This is just a kid with a local yearning but he is part of an assembling crowd, anonymous thousands off the buses and trains, people in narrow columns tramping over the swing bridge above the river, and even if they are not a migration or a revolution, some vast shaking of the soul, they bring with them the body heat of a great city and their own small reveries and desperations, the unseen something that haunts the day—men in fedoras and sailors on shore leave, the stray tumble of their thoughts, going to a game.  
(*Underworld* 11)

The crowd gathers with a vague yearning for some sort of shared expiatory experience, for what Osteen identifies as a “purgative ritual” to militate against “the unseen something that haunts the day,” and for a broad sense of solidarity, defining themselves as Dodger or Giant fans, a simple Us-versus-Them allegiance that less threateningly mirrors what would become the bipolar ideological world of the cold war (3). People’s urge to congregate, to seek an experience that “joins them all in a rare way, that binds them to a memory with protective power,”

constitutes, for DeLillo, what radio announcer Russ Hodges in the novel describes as “another kind of history,” a “people’s history” that “enters the skin more lastingly than the vast shaping strategies of eminent leaders, generals steely in their sunglasses” (59). For DeLillo, the celebrations following Thompson’s homerun demarcate the end of a certain vitality of public life in America—“Maybe it was the last time people spontaneously went out of their houses for something. For some wonder, some amazement”—the final momentary representation of a “halfway hopeful” postwar social vision before the atomic age engendered the “textured paranoia that replaces history” in American life (*Underworld* 1; DeLillo, “Power” 2).

The “binding power” of the game—“This is the nature of Thompson’s homer. It makes people want to be in the streets, joined with others, telling others what has happened, those few who haven’t heard—comparing faces and states of mind”—is contrasted, in the novel, to the public’s experience of the assassination of JFK—“When JFK was shot, people went inside. We watched TV in dark rooms and talked on the phone with friends and relatives. We were all separate and alone. But when Thompson hit the homer, people rushed outside (47; 94). The possibility of a sense of shared experience and communal expiation that drove people out onto the streets celebrating the dramatic manner of the Giants victory, had for DeLillo, by the time of the Kennedy assassination given way, under the pressure of cold war anxieties and the influence of television, to a more isolated and fragmented experience of history. For DeLillo, the game seemed to briefly illuminate the potential of certain public events, even if only briefly, to forge connections across the divisive elements of class and race in American society, to



provide images and experiences around which “the local yearnings” and individual “reveries and desperations,” what DeLillo sums up as “the sand-grain manyness of things that can’t be counted” in America, might briefly collect and enable a momentary experience of commonality (60).

DeLillo’s general presentation of the dissolution of public life in America, its fragmentation into an atomistic television audience, is certainly a lamentation for a kind of drama of commonality that itself partakes of the sort of nostalgia in which many of his characters indulge. In this regard, John Duvall correctly points to the ideological role played by baseball in American history, what he describes as its “aesthetic ideology that participates in masking the hidden costs of America’s cold war victory and in erasing race and class difference” in its mythological representation of the nation (Duvall 258). Indeed DeLillo’s utilization of the Thompson baseball as an object with almost mystical qualities to connect disparate American voices and lives adds something of a sentimental burnish to the novel. However, DeLillo does brandish his nostalgia purposefully in *Underworld*, juxtaposing his detailed fictional narrative of a significant public event experienced on the very day that America pivoted into the cold war era, against the kind of endless repetition of images and news stories detailing danger, disaster, and terror—the Cuban missile crisis, the Kennedy assassination, rampaging serial killers, the explosion of the Challenger, Chernobyl, AIDS—which, in the novel, constitute the shared historical experience mediated and disseminated by the mass news media during and after the cold war. “People seem to need news,” DeLillo has said in an interview, “any kind—bad news, sensationalistic news, overwhelming news. It seems to be that news is a narrative

of our time” (Remnick 44). If, as Mark Edmundson writes, “it’s on the news that the diverse images of Gothic coalesce into a world-view,” than DeLillo’s weaving together of a series of disastrous news-worthy events in his narrative certainly emulates this mood, adopting and critiquing what Edmundson argues is the most influential Gothic idiom of contemporary America (30).

In *Underworld*, Sister Grace attempts to talk Sister Edgar out of giving credence to stories of an “uncanny occurrence” related to the murder of a young homeless girl named Esmeralda. “‘You know what this is?’ Grace argues, ‘It’s the nightly news. It’s the local news at eleven with all the grotesque items neatly spaced to keep you watching the whole half hour’” (819). Grace’s conviction that the news acts largely as a spectacle which only panders to and confirms people’s least critical hopes and fears —“‘It’s how the news becomes so powerful it doesn’t need TV or newspapers. It exists in people’s perceptions. It’s something they invent, strong enough to seem real. It’s the news without the media’”—does little to dampen Sister Edgar’s “need to see this thing” (819). Throughout *Underworld*, characters express views concerning what they perceive to be an “unreal turn” in reality, a sense that, as Klara Sax says, “everything is vaguely—*what*—fictitious” (73). Beyond the postmodern self-reflexivity of such comments, DeLillo is also calling attention to the pervasiveness of a cultural and intellectual fascination with narratives, images, and spectacles that ratify an otherworldly sense of horror, threat, or presence. Mark Edmundson argues that, “we [Americans] now find ourselves in a culture where the Gothic idiom has slipped over from fiction and begun to shape and regulate our perception of reality” (63). Tony Tanner calls attention to this element of *Underworld*, when he describes its interest in “a string

of more or less sensationalistic news items or crisis,” and its presentation of Gothic images such as “a man who’d cut his eyeball out of its socket because it contained a satanic symbol,” and a “Museum of Misshapens,” complete with its resident Cyclops, which Nick visits in Russia, as DeLillo’s indulging in a “certain amount of atrocity tourism” (Tanner 207).

DeLillo demonstrates that he is well aware of the Gothic tone he is adopting in the novel, and its implications. The excesses of the culture of Gothic spectacle in which DeLillo is both indulging and critiquing is staged with mordant exaggeration, in *Underworld*, as a tour of the Wall, a deprived New York City neighborhood that is described as “a tuck of land adrift from the social order” (239). Sister Grace and Sister Edgar visit the Wall to hand out food and advice to its residents who include a prostitute whose silicone breasts have exploded, the one-eyed man that Tanner mentions, and a crew of orphans lead by graffiti artist Ishmael Munoz, who paint a memorial angel onto an exposed wall of a derelict tenement for every child that dies in the neighborhood. Strewn with the rubble of demolished buildings, littered with abandoned cars and bags of hospital waste, infested by rats, plagued by AIDS, and inhabited by robed monks who run a shelter for the homeless nearby and by “a band of charismatics who dance, weep and speak in tongues on the roofs of buildings, the Gothic drama of the Wall becomes a stop on the *South Bronx Surreal* bus tour. Coming across the “tour bus in carnival colors” unloading its tourists to snap pictures of the area, Sister Grace goes “half berserk,” screaming out the window of the van she is driving, “It’s not surreal. It’s real, it’s real. Your bus is surreal. You’re surreal” (247). Grace’s protest is a comment on the relationship between the kind of culture of

disengagement that results when the boundary between sociopolitical reality and the aesthetics of spectacle becomes distorted and blurred, and the post-cold war fascination with Gothic imagery, with spectacles of dread, danger, and gaudy abominations that confirm a picture of the world as ever-threatening, out of control, and irretrievably in decline.

Sister Edgar, we are told, understands the compulsion of the tourists—  
“You travel somewhere not for museums and sunsets but for ruins, bombed-out terrain, for the moss-grown memory of torture and war” (248). She is, of course, a devotee and proponent of the Gothic sensibility, and particularly of Edgar Allan Poe, whose poetry she teaches and with which, not surprisingly considering her name, she strongly identifies:

Alone in her room she wore a plain shift and read “The Raven.”  
She read it many times, memorizing the lines. She wanted to recite the poem to her class when school reopened. Her namesake poet, yes, and the dark croaking poem that made her feel Edgarish again. [...] she wanted to teach them fear. This was the secret heart of her curriculum and it would begin with the poem, with omen, loneliness and death, and she would make them shake in their back-to-school shoes. (775-776)

Edmundson identifies Poe with the ascendant Gothic impulse in the contemporary American consciousness, the propensity to view the world as replete with dark and powerful forces against which there is no means of defense beyond the cynical fatalism that marks a sophisticated paranoia, and what Edmundson calls “the ethos of facile transcendence,” images and fantasies which promise a quasi-mystical release from the anxieties, dangers, and injustices of the real world. For Edmundson, the ascendancy of the culture of Gothic pessimism and the yearning for “facile transcendence” have a reciprocal relationship, an affinity which DeLillo

seems to dramatize when Sister Edgar's "raven's heart" is stirred by an "angelus of clearest joy," as she watches what she believes is the face of the murdered girl Esmeralda—which is likely just the image of a "papered-over ad show[ing] through the current ad"—miraculously appear on a billboard, a structure which, of course, Edgar is said to regard as the equivalent of "medieval church architecture" (249; 822; 820).

Like Edmundson, DeLillo locates "a credible yearning for some better form of life" in his characters' attraction to crude forms of mysticism and their promises of easy redemption or transcendence, particularly as they offer more affirmative and hopeful visions of the world than the culture of Gothic pessimism with its dominant tones of paranoia and cynicism (xvi). However, *Underworld* does not retreat from its own indictment of the political and material reality of America to embrace or encourage a fantasy of post-cold war regeneration. For DeLillo, the psychic, political, environmental, and social waste left over from the cold war is too toxic to be buried deep in the sacred-ground of history and forgotten. The cold war may be over, but for DeLillo as the specter of nuclear war and the communist threat seep out of the national bloodstream, the forces of runaway global capitalism, environmental degradation, political disenfranchisement, urban decline, and the unsolved issues of race and inequality emerge out from under the shadow of the bomb. But critically, while clearly the prevailing mode of the novel, the voice of Gothic pessimism does not go uncontested in *Underworld*.

Richard Rorty worries that when confronted with the consequences of globalization, the malaise of contemporary American democracy, and the

enervated state of the Left in American politics, an unchecked Gothic drive can result in the entrenchment of a “spirit of detached spectatorship” at the heart of the American political imagination, the relinquishing of a sense of agency or citizenship in favor of “a Gothic world in which democratic politics has become a farce,” and in which real change is conceived as only possible via “inexplicable, magical transformations” (Rorty *Achieving* 11; 95; 102). In *Underworld*, amongst the paranoid visions, ghost stories, and medieval ruins, and in the midst of the iconography of angels, tabloid miracles, and talk-show theories, DeLillo posts signs of engaged agency, representative images and attitudes not given over to the twin temptations of Gothic despair and the desire for some form of quasi-mystical redemption. We are given the voice of Sister Grace, who objects to the angels painted on the Wall as a distraction from the material concerns that directly impact on local and community improvement:

“I wish they’d stop already with the angels,” Gracie said, “It’s in totally bad taste. A fourteenth-century church, that’s where you go for angels. This wall publicizes all the things we’re working to change. Ishmael should look for positive things to emphasize. The townhouses, the community gardens that people plant. Walk around the corner you see ordinary people going to work, going to school. Stores and churches.” (239)

Sister Grace, as Sister Edgar puts it, is best described as “a soldier, a fighter for human worth” (249).

And, as already mentioned, we are also given Klara Sax’s artistic vision, her repainting of B52 bombers as a means of refocusing attention on “the ordinary thing,” on the “individual life” as a “sign against death,” as a representation of the power of the “kind of history” that takes place in the “remote and common streets” to reassert itself even after the invention of the bomb, the thing which, as Klara

says, can't be named because it is "too big or evil or outside your experience" (78; 781; 77)

'See, we're painting, hand-painting in some cases, putting our hands to great weapons systems, to systems that came out of the factories and assembly halls as near alike as possible, millions of components stamped out, repeated endlessly, and we're trying to unrepeat, to find an element of felt life, and maybe there's a sort of survival instinct here, a graffiti instinct—to trespass and declare ourselves, show who we are.' (77)

Klara's art is a symbolic declaration of agency, an assertion of the idiosyncratic self against the massive systems of consumer capitalism and war, the twined forces of weapons and waste that, embodied in the disused bombers, she appropriates as her artistic medium. The politics of the "remote and common streets" is also at the heart of the graffiti writing of Moonman 157, whose work gives a voice to "all those empty tenements that have people living there even if you don't see them," confronting commuters with "his letters and numbers [that] told a story of tenement life, good and bad but mostly good" (440). His is an "art of the backstreets" which asserts the vital presence of diverse voices in American life—"you can't *not* see us anymore, you can't *not* know who we are" (440).

In such voices and images *Underworld* states its "adversarial relationship" with what DeLillo has referred to as "the monotone of the state, the corporate entity, the product, the assembly line" ("Power," 2). They also embody, in DeLillo's work, a half-buried but resilient impulse to counter the Gothic fears and images which are an inescapable element of American life after the cold war, with more hopeful visions capable of inspiring a less spectatorial and fatalistic engagement with "the intersecting systems [that] help pull us apart, leaving us vague, drained, docile, soft in our inner discourse, willing to be shaped, to be



overwhelmed,” than those offered by consumer culture or the mass media (DeLillo, *Underworld*, 826). Discernable in DeLillo’s representation of Sister Grace’s pragmatic faith in the struggle for social improvement, Klara Sax’s symbolic transformation of the systems of war and waste, and the evocative demand for recognition expressed in Moonman 157’s graffiti, is a yearning for a productive response to the prevailing Gothic gloom in America, one that affirms expressions of social engagement, agency, and diversity as a means of resisting the hardening sense of resigned pessimism, cynicism, and fatalism that accompanies the complex and shifting nature of the anxieties facing the individual in post-cold war America.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Just *Vineland*?: Pynchon's Vision of Hope, Justice and the State of American Liberal Democracy**

“Without any shadow of doubt, amidst this vertigo of shows and politics, I settle myself ever the firmer in the creed, that we should not postpone and refer and wish, but do broad justice where we are, by whomsoever we deal with, accepting our actual companions and circumstances, however humble or odious, as the mystic officials to whom the universe has delegated its whole pleasure for us. If these are mean and malignant, their contentment, which is the last victory of justice, is a more satisfying echo to the heart, than the voice of poets and the casual sympathy of admirable persons.”

--Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience”

Thomas Pynchon's work has been the subject of incredible critical scrutiny, generating an exegetical industry whose growth is attributable to both the dense and esoteric allusiveness of his writing, and to the centrality of his major themes—entropy, technology, paranoia, and communication—to the postmodern critical mood. Interpreters have meticulously and convincingly mapped out the Pynchonian critique of the post-Fordist, late capitalist world, tracing the myriad lines that run through the references, allegories, and self-reflexive parallels of his novels, and in general confirming the predominant characterization of Pynchon's vision of modern Western civilization as dark, disillusioned, and radically skeptical (or even relativist).

This general critical framework alters very little when the subject of the political aspects of Pynchon's fiction is addressed. The political dimension of his work is most often characterized as nihilistic or absurdist, as constituting what Louis Tyson refers to as Pynchon's “politics of despair” (Tyson 8). There is very little doubt among critics that Pynchon is in some sense sympathetic with the left,

however his disillusionment and pessimism is such that, as Tony Hilfer concludes, his work “seems located not before or during the rebellion against the rationalized death-world but after the surrender” (153). Pynchon thus has become America’s most celebrated literary chronicler of the “one-dimensional world,” with whatever immediate political concerns or distinct political philosophy that might surface in his work, subsumed by the shadow of the monolithic System, that amalgamation of power structures and organized authority which, as the argument goes, has achieved totalizing power in the world that Pynchon portrays.

Reading *V.*, or his *magnum opus*, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, leaves little doubt that the train of Pynchon’s political thinking runs through some fairly apocalyptic and pessimistic territory. With the emergence of the cold war, and the growing instrumentalization of systems of authority as an historical and social context—particularly in *Gravity’s Rainbow*—Pynchon conveys a strong sense of political constriction, by depicting, with both the content and language of his fiction, the shrinking space in the emerging technocratatist order for the kind of political dissent, individualism, and resistance to authority that are supposed to lie at the heart of the American experience. In this respect, as is often pointed out, Pynchon’s work is said to follow in the Puritan tradition of the American Jeremiad, his fiction a “cry in the wilderness” that, to paraphrase Sacvan Bercovitch’s influential understanding of that tradition, laments the waning, while simultaneously celebrating, the founding ideals of America. This sermonistic political tone in Pynchon’s work mingles with his self-professed Ludditism, or what he calls the “profound unwillingness to give up elements of faith, however ‘irrational,’ to an emerging technopolitical order,” to suggest a rather fatalistic

attitude towards contemporary politics, a highly critical, but finally hopeless, view of a world where resistance to the expanding power of “the machine” is noble, but ultimately futile (Pynchon, “Luddite” 40).

There are, however, some critics who argue, perhaps most persuasively Mark Conroy, Jerry Varsava, and Cyrus K. Patell, that such a characterization of Pynchon’s political view overlooks a more determinate political stance that lies beneath the surface of his pessimism, and that understands Pynchon to be, less a disillusioned postmodernist or a disappointed humanist, then a liberal, a novelist offering in his work, particularly his domestic novels *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland*, what Varsava calls “a powerful, if often diffuse and indirect, defense of American political liberalism”(64).<sup>1</sup> Such an approach is readily reconcilable with the jeremiadic elements of Pynchon’s work. It claims to identify, in Pynchon’s vision of contemporary America, a sacred-secular critique of a fallen nation, alienated from the high sense of moral mission that defined its Puritan origins, and betraying the founding liberal values that were, to a significant extent, the political legacy of that moral idealism. If we are to believe those who portray Pynchon as an exponent of liberalism, it is this fusion found in Pynchon’s fiction, of the apocalyptic tone of the jeremiad and the affirmation of the political ideals of liberalism, which is the most definitive and determinate feature of Pynchon’s political philosophy.

Pynchon’s liberalism is manifest, as Varsava tells us, not in any direct or concise expression of liberal ideology or theory, but rather in the rejection, implicit

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<sup>1</sup> Varsava’s short list of liberal beliefs and virtues include: “toleration, respect for civil liberties, acknowledgement of property rights, concern for the disadvantaged, (qualified) faith in reason” (Varsava 64). These beliefs are implicit, for Varsava and Mark Conroy, in the Pynchonian slogan from *V*. “keep cool but care,” and in his support for “excluded middles” in *The Crying of Lot 49*.

in his work, of those antagonistic ideologies and political philosophies, specifically communitarianism and libertarianism<sup>2</sup>, which have mounted significant challenges to liberalism in postwar America. What Pynchon does not seem at all interested in defending, however, is the economic and technological idea of progress that has been such an important element of liberal ideology since the Enlightenment, and a central feature of America's liberal tradition since the Revolution. The Luddite sensibility, so obviously invoked in Pynchon's work, may not imply a repudiation of liberalism, but it is undeniably hostile to the faith in modernization that has so often driven liberal political praxis, striving to counter the liberal tendency to represent change and technological development as synonymous with progress. Certainly it could be said that Pynchon's work is as much a critique of liberalism in postwar America, as it is a defense of it in the face of contemporary ideological challenges. In fact, much of what can be considered political in Pynchon's work addresses some of the most pressing and contentious issues surrounding the development and practice of liberalism in postwar America, not just as a means of underlining the American betrayal of its liberal tradition, but also as part of a liberal democratic critique of contemporary America's central political institutions.

There seems a delicate balance attempting to be struck in Pynchon's work, that very difficult tightrope walk between striving, as Pynchon puts it, to "deny to

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<sup>2</sup> Varsava identifies the libertarian and communitarian challenge to liberalism with, respectively, Pierce Inverarity in *Lot 49*, and Brock Vond in *Vineland*. His argument is constructive and points rightly in an ideological direction however, I would argue, he caricatures the communitarian and libertarian positions a little too reductively to be wholly convincing. Specifically, I would point to Varsava's association of communitarianism with the position that "authority must be respected unconditionally and must not be placed under the lens of liberal skepticism," and his presentation of Inverarity as representing pure libertarian ideals despite the care Pynchon takes to point out the connections of Inverarity's economic interests with the government and with the military industrial complex, as particularly contentious issues. (Varsava 79).

the machine at least some of its claims on us,” without being perceived to be engaged in a reactionary assault on the idea of modernity and progress as such (Pynchon, “Luddite” 40). Leo Marx has identified this kind of dynamic as a strong characteristic of the American literary tradition, tracing it through writers as central as Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and Henry Adams, and ascribing it to the peculiarly American susceptibility to a fatalistic view of technology, that is part of what he describes as “pastoralism in the American context” (“American Literary Culture” 187). For Marx, America has always struggled “to embrace—simultaneously and as if reconcilable—the progressive and the pastoral world-views,” and its most astute writers, recognizing the inherent instability and contradictoriness of this combination, express, in their work, a pastoralism that entails “neither an uncritical embrace of material progress nor its total repudiation” (187). They attempt to give voice to their concerns and disaffection with the apparent absence of limits on technological and economic progress, while at the same time recognizing technology, or “The Machine,” as Marx labels the defining metaphor of American pastoralism, as unquestionably the primary force of contemporary history.

As Marx points out, this distinctive form of secular fatalism is itself an expression of political discontent, and often indicates a disaffection with the complexity of politics and a tendency towards “disengagement from the public realm and a reversion to inaction and privacy” (207). In contemporary America, as in the Americas of Twain and Adams, this discontent often manifests itself in a reaffirmation of those liberal values seen to be most consistent with the American creed—mainly virtues such as individual rights, the pursuit of private happiness,

compassion, and tolerance. However, today this tendency to set aside the difficult tensions and problems posed by the political realm and political theory in favour of the cultivation of a consensus built around private virtues and individual liberty, is often presented as part of a pragmatic response to a political sphere still infected with the language and metaphysics of Enlightenment rationalism.

Antifoundationalist in nature, contemporary pragmatism approaches the modernist belief in progress, not as a matter of philosophical, moral, or even historical truth, but rather as a contingency, as a concept that has arisen in a specific cultural context, and which is rooted in a given social practice. Thus, the continuing tension between the progressive and pastoral world-views, that Marx identifies as a significant element of the often fateful and apocalyptic idea of technology that has been a distinguishing feature of the American literary tradition, is, for liberal pragmatists, most usefully approached with self-consciousness and irony, with an awareness of the shifting and provisional nature of all ideas, values, and beliefs.

Liberal pragmatism formulates its values, not by grounding them in any metaphysical or rational account of human nature or worth, but rather by recognizing them as the beliefs and convictions which are presently central to the community in which we inhabit, a community which Richard Rorty refers to as the “North Atlantic Postmodern Bourgeois Liberal Democracy” (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*). This vision of liberalism, which denies the necessity, or even the possibility, of providing liberal convictions with a philosophical footing, seeks to affirm such ideals as pluralism and individual freedom as cultural, as belonging to the shared set of contingent practices and beliefs which constitute the background



against which our particular community, the group with which we identify, reflects on, and converses about, political and moral issues. Indeed, according to Varsava, Pynchon is an exponent of just this kind of pragmatic position. Without attempting to root his defense of American liberal convictions and institutions in the language of transcendental truth claims or Enlightenment ideology, Pynchon recognizes the dangers that the communitarian and libertarian challenges pose to the understanding of justice, fairness, and tolerance in contemporary America, and responds with irony and parody, engaging in both an appeal to the worthiness and desirability of liberal values, as well as a constant self-questioning which emphasizes the subjective and linguistic nature of his liberal commitments.

Liberalism then, for Pynchon, can be understood as “really nothing more than a series of dialogues played out over time,” an ongoing discussion, amongst a community which uses a particular political vocabulary, based on a set of historically contingent but generally shared understandings regarding what is important, justifiable or reasonable grounds for public debate regarding those convictions central to our existing liberal democratic society (Varsava 92). Viewed in this manner, liberalism does not, and cannot, provide an absolute ground for this vocabulary, but rather rests its ethical case on its dedication to freedom as its supreme value, a dedication that cannot be justified by any moral recourse independent of the current beliefs and practices of the liberal democratic community. It is a position Varsava refers to as “postmodern liberalism,” and identifies most closely with the work of John Rawls and Richard Rorty.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For what it is worth, Rorty seems not to recognize in Pynchon’s work a political point of view at all sympathetic with his own. In fact, in his book *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty refers particularly

If it is the case, however, as I shall argue, that Pynchon is engaged, not just in a defense of liberal values, but also a critique of existing liberal democratic institutions and practices, then it seems reasonable to explore the extent to which, and on what ethical or political grounds, Pynchon furnishes a basis for his social and political criticism. Certainly, following Leo Marx, it is helpful to be aware of the American susceptibility to pastoral idealism, and the fatalistic view of technology that is often its product, when considering Pynchon's Luddite tendencies. However, Pynchon's willingness in his work—particularly in *Vineland*, the novel which will dominate our attention here—to engage with the central institutions of his time, to mark the expansion of power that has often been the price of progress, without losing faith in the potency and relevancy of American liberal democratic principles as a basis for social criticism and institutional indictment, indicates that, at the very least, Pynchon's pastoralist and Luddite tendencies cannot be said to signal a disengagement from politics or a reversion into relativism or radical skepticism.

Nor can it be said that Pynchon's work is entirely given over to the mythic or religious withdrawal from experience, to the "refusal to confront the present, fear of the future, [and the] effort to translate 'America' into a vision that works in spirit because it can never be tested in fact," that Bercovitch tells us is characteristic of the American Jeremiad (xiv). Undeniably, Pynchon's political perspective offers much in the way of disappointment and very little in the way of optimism, but there is a need to distinguish between optimism and hope in

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to Pynchon's novel *Vineland*, as a novel "not of social protest but rather of rueful acquiescence in the end of American hopes" (6).

Pynchon<sup>4</sup>. Pynchon's vision of America, and his critique of its culture and institutions, is underwritten by an understanding of the contradictory implications of American exceptionalism. Historian John Patrick Diggins clearly formulates this contradiction when he writes that:

Embedded in the phrase "American exceptionalism" are two contrasting meanings, one upholding differences, rare conditions, and a sense of destiny; the other concentrating on deficiencies and common shortcomings that cast doubt on whether America will succeed. (*Hallowed Ground* 103)

In other words, American exceptionalism can mean "either deliverance or deprivation," the promise of progress or the frustrations of inadequacy (103). It is often assumed that Pynchon's work focuses exclusively on the latter; that he implicitly ties the notion of American exceptionalism to the debasement and corruption of America at the hands of capitalists, imperialists, fascists, and military technocrats. As one critic would have it "Pynchon focuses upon the exploitation of cultural mythology ['the mythology of exceptionalism'] to perpetuate internal class divisions and to further America's imperialistic ambitions" (Madsen 1998).

It seems to me that this view, while certainly legitimate, is too narrow to fully circumscribe the breath of political perspective that Pynchon offers in his work. Pynchon's particular inclination towards American exceptionalism stops short of being purely jeremiadic, largely because he goes beyond just positing America as, in the words of one of the most quoted of Pynchonian phrases, a land where "the chances [were] once so good for diversity," to take seriously the hope embedded in the political and moral principles which gave rise to reform

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<sup>4</sup> My endeavor to differentiate between hope and optimism is significantly informed by the emphasis the distinction receives in the work of Christopher Lasch.

movements as varied and flawed as progressivism, populism, and the sixties' counterculture (Pynchon, *Lot 49* 181).

Even if we accept the pragmatic temperament of Pynchon's liberalism, an attribute that Varsava identifies with the antifoundationalist neopragmatism of Rorty, and that Baker identifies with the progressive pragmatism of Dewey, we must also address those elements of Pynchon's work, particularly in *Vineland*, that evidence Pynchon's recognition of the limits of that pragmatism. What follows accepts the view that Pynchon's liberalism is essentially pragmatic in orientation, but argues that this pragmatism is tempered by a sense of fate, an insistence on the recognition of the limitations imposed on progress and freedom, and the demands placed on social virtue, by the contingencies of history, the constraints of nature, the inescapability of human imperfection, and the inadequacy of political institutions. The tone of lament which often underlies the political perspective offered in Pynchon's work, for the loss of democratic values and the diminishment of the democratic character of political institutions in America, indicates a refusal to dissociate what has been lost from the past from the choices of the present, and thus evokes a kind of liberal democratic hope that is defined, not by the circumscriptions of present power arrangements, or by the ritual political idealism of the jeremiad, but by the conviction, often re-animated through remembrance of the past rather than anticipation of the future, that a staunch belief in justice is never completely without justification in America. In *Vineland*, Pynchon looks to the American experience of these limitations, filtered largely through the political hopes, frustrations and failures of his reform minded characters, not as an exercise in liberal nostalgia, but as an affirmation of liberal democratic belief, an assertion

of faith in the goodness of what has often been called the unachieved “philosophical cause” of America in the face of the glaring hypocrisy, cynicism, uncertainty, and injustice which define the contemporary state of the nation in his work.

### Of Murals and the Megastate: Postwar American Liberalism and Pynchon's Discontent

In his review of *Vineland*, published in *The New York Times*, Salmon Rushdie describes Pynchon's novel as “that rarest of birds: a major political novel about what America has been doing to itself, to its children, all these many years.” Rushdie's characterization of *Vineland* as less than optimistic concerning recent political developments in America will hardly startle any reader of Pynchon's fiction, but what may provide pause, as it seems to have for Rushdie, is the sense of nostalgia he detects in *Vineland*, the hint of possible redemption surrounding Pynchon's presentation of the values and political ideals which were in the ascendancy in the America of the 1960's, “values that *Vineland* seeks to recapture, by remembering what they meant before the dirt got thrown all over them.” In fact for many readers of Pynchon's work, as Joseph Tabbi has pointed out, *Vineland* has finally exposed “Pynchon's true face,” identifying him once and for all as “an old lefty nostalgic for the lost history of Pacific northwest unions and Wobbly politics [...] who is willing to assert, against all the co-opted radicalism, fallen ideals, and unfulfilled ‘acid adventures’ of the sixties, a positive sense of community with his contemporaries” (Tabbi 92). For such critics, Pynchon's fictional foray into the recent American past is little more than yet another method

of disparaging the present, the product of a political sensibility driven by disillusionment and compelled to revisit the innocence and idealism of a period now lost and irretrievable to a reprobate present, in order to locate any framework of values or community on which to hang a very precarious final hope of redemption.

In this sort of politicized context, using the term “nostalgic” to characterize *Vineland* seems as much an accusation as a description, implying, as it usually does, a political perspective clinging to a rather romanticized interpretation of the past against the absence of a hopeful vision of the future. What the nostalgic politics of *Vineland* fails to provide, as Tabbi goes on to suggest, is anything like “a new style of resistance” with which to confront the repressive political situation that the novel, he admits, so accurately presents (99). Tabbi accuses *Vineland* of raising important political concerns only as a means to more powerfully evoke a generation’s experience of disillusionment. It is the irretrievability of an earlier time, of possibilities and innocence now past, that drives the political agenda of *Vineland* for Tabbi, an approach that drains the political issues raised by the novel “of any felt urgency,” and simply reinforces the rather paralyzing notion that against the kind of cultural and institutional hegemony that defines contemporary America any “‘underground’ resistance has long since stopped being viable” (99).

Rushdie’s review and Tabbi’s objections share the perception that, in some sense, *Vineland*’s style of reminiscence offers a kind of refuge from the current state of affairs, though they assess the political implications of this nostalgic attitude quite differently. Rushdie identifies what he calls “a hint of redemption” in this longing to recapture the innocence and hope of a period now irretrievable,

arguing that Pynchon's nostalgic approach in *Vineland*, even if guilty of sentimentality, cultivates a sense of the past, an understanding that history can offer an alternative vision which, in contrast to the despondency and cynicism inspired by the political realities of the present, keeps alive the possibility of what another critic has called "a recuperated salvation" (Pittman 39). Where Rushdie detects Pynchon asserting a growing understanding of the redemptive power of the past in *Vineland*, Tabbi finds only a deepening sense of resignation about the novel. For Tabbi, *Vineland*'s apparent enthrallment with the past is an indication of Pynchon's lack of faith in the future, further evidence that he has consigned the progressive hopes for political reform and social equality to some lost golden age, and contented himself with a spectatorial and retrospective fictional mode that, producing a narrative vulnerable to accusations of political indeterminacy and ineffectualness, left Tabbi "doubting the seriousness of his project in the book" (97).

Pynchon's pessimistic representation of the present, his apparent lack of confidence regarding the future, and his evocation of a past when the leftist values that seem to inform his politics were vibrant and relevant, lead both Rushdie and Tabbi to approach *Vineland* as something of a lament, as a novel that seeks to offer an uncompromising satire of contemporary America grounded in political realism, but tempered with a sense of commiseration, with an appreciation that there is some comfort, however cold, to be found in fiction that revisits a more optimistic, less cynical period of American history. For both Rushdie and Tabbi, Pynchon evokes the recent past to emphasize just how little hold it seems to have on the present, to demonstrate the extent to which the hopes and aspirations of two



generations of the progressive left have been thoroughly undermined by the shifting power dynamics of contemporary American life and politics.

There is no doubt that Pynchon is reacting to the eclipse of post WWII American progressive liberalism in *Vineland*, but to characterize his narrative of this stunted development as nostalgic or as merely an act of recollection, whether interpreted as an affirmation of the possibility of redemption or as a sign of resignation, seems to miss the sense of persistence which pervades his evocation of the past, to disregard the effort Pynchon makes, in the novel, to trace the multifarious ways that the past, and our understanding of the past, continues to influence all aspects of our present day lives. What Pynchon provides in *Vineland* is a sense of history as the shifting current of human experience, not as merely a study in corruption and the loss of innocence. He does not bury the past in nostalgic images nor represent it as something dead, lacking either relevance or influence in the face of the dynamic progress of the contemporary world; rather Pynchon's understanding of the state of American liberalism and democracy, dramatized in his rather dystopic vision of contemporary American social and political life, is haunted by the past, by both the ever-changing construction of history and its undeniable consequences.

Pynchon has too pragmatic an understanding of history, despite his much discussed affinity for the notion of entropy, to fully despair of the American republic in the fashion of Henry Adams. Nor does the kind of dystopic writing in which he engages in *Vineland* simply present, as Booker M. Keith suggests, "a vivid and chilling picture of contemporary America as a land of lost hopes and broken dreams, a place where huge, impersonal forces have subtly gained the

power to dictate the courses of individual lives" (5). *Vineland* goes well beyond just offering the rather banal observation "that America is not the land of dreams envisioned in [the] long-lived utopian fantasy," to vigorously engage many of the most crucial and urgent issues facing contemporary American liberal democracy (7). The impossibility of disentangling these issues from the choices, struggles, and failures of the past, individual as well as political, lends much of the potency to Pynchon's central political themes, particularly the meaning of justice and the conception of progress at work in the contemporary America he portrays.

The principles of justice and progress are not merely the distant echoes of an anachronistic and defeated utopianism in *Vineland*, but rather they provide markers, historical and ideological, by which the novel seeks to situate and contextualize the current state of American liberal democracy. In both a thematic, and sometimes literal sense, as we can see from the following passage describing Frenesi's first encounter with the figure of Brock Vond, they serve as a kind of thematic mise-en-scène against which Pynchon's Reagan-era drama of compromised ex-hippies, power-mad bureaucrats, and media-saturated teenage nihilists unfolds:

Brock had convened his roving jury up in Oregon to look into subversion on the campus of a small community college, and 24fps had gone there to film the proceedings, or as much as they could find with Brock always changing venues and times on them at the last minute. They chased him from the courthouse, the drive-in movie lot, finally back to the courthouse again, where Frenesi, by then not expecting him, just trying to shoot some old WPA murals about Justice and Progress, if she could figure a way to compensate for the colors, which had darkened with the years since the New Deal, in the middle of a slow pan around the rotunda, happened to pick up in her viewfinder this compact figure in a beige double-knit, striding toward the staircase. (200)

Certainly the faded murals in the above passage signify the declining influence of the principles of social justice and progressivism on the development of post WWII American politics, however, there is also an important and compelling sense in which Frenesi's interest in the murals, her struggle to recapture the political potency of the symbols on film, despite their darkening colors, acts as a reminder of the unachieved promise of a variety of American political traditions. *Vineland*'s political themes of justice and progress are not just representative of the eclipse of liberal and social progressive ideals in contemporary America, but are also suggestive of the possibilities kept alive by the memory of the political, by the belief that such fundamental principles still operate, even if only tacitly, as an element of the American political consciousness.

Pynchon's explicit reference to the New Deal as a watershed historical and political moment in the shaping of postwar American liberal democracy, and its shifting attitudes towards justice and progress, is broadened and developed in *Vineland*, by his account of the history of three generations of the Becker family and their experience of the profound changes in the nature and conception of state power introduced "in the years since the New Deal." *Vineland* pays particular attention to the decline of the labor movement, the demoralization of the New Left and the counter-cultural revolution, and the ascension of Reaganism and ideological "neo-conservatism," three crucial episodes, in both the history of postwar America and in the story of the Becker family, which point to a new consolidation and expansion of power whose emergence is a direct challenge to traditional conceptions of democracy and citizenship.

Pynchon's concern regarding the evolution of the New Deal conception of liberalism, and the profound implications that it had for the expansion of state power in postwar America, is an important political and ideological signpost in his work. We can see distinct indications of this in his novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, published in 1966, in which Oedipa Mass, chasing after the legacy of Pierce Inverarity, is soon overwhelmed by the complexity and scope of the shadow that Inverarity has cast over the social and political landscape of her beloved America. Many critics identify Inverarity as a rather conspicuous example of the prototypical capitalist run amuck, and allegorize his pervasive presence in the novel as a thinly veiled expression of Pynchon's discontent with the dangerous hegemony that liberal capitalist values seem to wield in all aspects of contemporary American life. From an ideological perspective Jerry A. Varsava argues that Inverarity's presence in the novel exemplifies the values of libertarianism, in particular economic libertarianism, an ideology that raises unfettered capitalism and the pursuit of individual interest to the status of moral absolutes. Discussing Inverarity's ubiquity in the novel Varsava writes:

The vestiges of this rogue entrepreneur are apparent everywhere that Oedipa looks—in the multiplying conspiracies, in the tangled web of his commercial enterprises, in the urban sprawl of Southern California, and, most notably, in the rigid economic stratification that defines American society. All of these conditions can ultimately be traced back to Inverarity's (and unnamed others) successful pursuit of the ideals of economic libertarianism. (70)

It is, of course, more than legitimate to read Inverarity as the incarnation of the destructive nature of greed and economic inequality in American society, but to lay the blame for all of the social, political, and economic concerns that Varsava lists solely at the feet of an ideology, however objectionable, whose ideals had

more or less been relegated to the political margins during the period in question—a period which historians Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle argue was dominated by “New Deal [...] ideas, public policies, and political alliances,” seems unsatisfactory when dealing with a writer as politically astute as Pynchon seems to be (ix).

Certainly the kind of unfettered capitalism that is the economic system of choice for libertarians was much in evidence in America in the early part of the twentieth century. Highly unregulated and unresponsive to progressive social ideas, the capitalist elite in America, those whom Roosevelt in his inaugural speech referred to as “the rulers of the exchange of mankind’s goods,” pursued the production of capital and the accumulation of individual wealth largely unrestrained by regulatory institutions or interventionist state policies. That is, of course, until the onset of the high unemployment and social distress of the Great Depression.

The flurry of policies and governmental initiatives which President Franklin Roosevelt’s administration designed to attend to the many immediate social and economic problems associated with the Depression, which collectively came to be known as the “New Deal,” promised not just relief from the pressing crisis of the greatest economic collapse in American history, but also sought to frame reforms to provide the federal government with a larger, and it was hoped stabilizing, influence on America’s economic and social development. The notion that the state had a significant role to play in the way that capitalism functions in America had its origins in the progressive reform movements of the early twentieth century which recognized the social and political dangers of large

corporations having too much power and influence over the lives of individuals and over the American economy as a whole. The New Deal promised to institutionalize this progressive spirit by recognizing that capitalism in America often needed to be saved from itself, and that a duly elected democratic government, concerned with the plight of the individual citizen and prepared to enact significant social and economic reforms, was the instrument best suited for the job. This fundamentally anti-libertarian project became the basis for modern American liberalism.

That “New Deal liberalism” was certainly not consistent with the strong belief in “laissez-faire” capitalism that is associated with the libertarian elements of American liberalism, and yet was supported with enthusiasm by many liberals of the period, is a strong indication of just how out of favor libertarian ideals had become. As Brian J. Cook argues, Roosevelt’s redefinition of liberalism was in fact a shifting of liberal ideology away from its traditional emphasis on economic liberty towards an emphasis on pragmatic reform, a shift that significantly changed the liberal understanding of the role of government in American life.

Roosevelt had to label his program distinctively and banish to the political wilderness any opponents who might claim the same label. FDR achieved this by adopting the title “liberal” and forcing his opponents to accept the designation “conservative.” [...] This was an especially meaningful achievement, for the American creed was fundamentally liberal. According to John Dewey, the creed consisted of two strains of liberalism—laissez-faire and humanitarian—with the former dominant and latter associated with personal and voluntary effort. FDR successfully raised the political status of humanitarian liberalism and redefined it in connection with government activism, generating a still-increasing sharp competition between the two streams of liberal thought—now in the guise of liberalism and conservatism. (Cook 106)

While Cook implies that the term “liberal,” as it was applied by Roosevelt to the amalgam of initiatives, policies and ideas that constituted the New Deal, reflected Roosevelt’s keen political sense more than his ideological sympathies, the fact remains that New Deal liberalism, with its emphasis on the expansion of state intervention in social and economic matters central to American life, was the dominant force in America’s political culture well into the postwar era.

If it is the case then, as *The Crying of Lot 49* clearly and repeatedly suggests, that Inverarity’s story is the story of contemporary America, then it could be argued that the social and economic conditions that Oedipa discovers in his wake are more the result of the shortcomings and incongruities associated with the development of contemporary American liberalism than the success of Inverarity’s libertarian ideals. The story of Pierce Inverarity appears to be that of just another successful American capitalist, however, his legacy is given form and meaning, not by Inverarity the man, but by Oedipa, by her obsessive drive to reconcile the America she thought she inherited, with the poverty, disenfranchisement, and paranoia she confronts on her journey. Determined to make whatever sense she can of the “scatter of business interests that had survived Inverarity,” Oedipa begins to sense that while the great edifice of America’s liberal order seems to be in a state of deterioration, another order, its ideals less determinate and its nature less conspicuous than liberalism’s, an order which is somehow tied to Inverarity, is tightening its grip on all elements of American life.

In this regard the textual evidence that Varsava provides to justify his characterization of Inverarity as “a paragon of libertarian heroicism” points constructively in an ideological direction—though I would like to argue that the



orientation in question is more usefully described as corporatist rather than libertarian (71). Varsava writes:

Yoyodyne Inc., a large defense contractor—suggestive of Pynchon’s onetime employer, Boeing—comes into view and with it the specter of the “military-industrial complex” President Eisenhower warned America about in 1961, just before leaving office. (Indeed, Eisenhower realized that the military-industrial complex posed a threat to American liberty and justice unprecedented in the nation’s history.) A major shareholder in Yoyodyne, Inverarity, after the fashion of the robber baron, secretly arranged the special tax break that brought the company to this location in the first place. Inverarity’s machinations give new meaning to Adam Smith’s notion of the ‘invisible hand.’ (In a perverse, libertarian reading of *civitas*, Inverarity sees his self-interested scheming as the proper office of a ‘founding father’ [26].) (71)

What emboldens a self-interested capitalist like Inverarity to legitimize himself as a “founding father” is a political environment in which the collaboration between the state and the interests of capital encourages the development of quasi-governmental structures and dangerously influential private interests groups. Such a political environment is made manifest in the novel, as Varsava rightly indicates, by the imposing presence of Yoyodyne Inc. and the “military industrial complex” that it suggests. Inverarity’s statesmanlike status is indicative of the emerging corporatist reality of postwar America’s political development, a reality that historian Alan Brinkley describes in this passage from *Liberalism and its*

*Discontents*:

In the postwar era there emerged [...] what became, in a sense, a second government: a national security state, powerful, entrenched, constantly expanding, and largely invulnerable to political attacks; a state that forged intimate partnerships with the corporate world, constantly blurring the distinctions between public and private; and a state that produced some of the very things—strengthened private monopolies and expanded state power to sustain them—that the liberal vision was supposed to prevent. (93)

Certainly Inverarity's actions in *The Crying of Lot 49* are in his own interest, but behind each of his "machinations" is a corporatist-style relationship to a state structure or expanded governmental function that plays an instrumental role in his success.

"What *is* it that they know that the powerless do not? What terrible structure behind the appearance of diversity and enterprise?" (Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* 165). These questions from *Gravity's Rainbow* take aim at exactly the same kinds of issues that Oedipa's pursuit of Inverarity's legacy in *The Crying of Lot 49* inevitably compel her to consider. In fact, it could be argued that the political consciousness raised by these questions, a consciousness that is skeptical, suspicious of unseen connections, and wary of any organization or power structure that appears simple is, at least for Oedipa, Inverarity's most important legacy. And while the overall effect of Pynchon's interrogation of postwar power in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* seems to point, as many critics have argued, towards the politicization of a very broad and diffuse sense of paranoia, there also emerges, in these two novels, a more specific and substantial ideological critique that reaches beyond the esoteric logic of a world replete with shadowy conspiracies and secret plots, to call attention to specific shifts in ideology that have greatly shaped political, institutional, and social developments in postwar America.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Of course the great question of *Lot 49* always remains—is Oedipa's determination to "create constellations" from the apparent disorder of Inverarity's affairs the result of paranoia, or of a fortuitous unearthing of a perversely complicated intrigue—the shadowy Tristero conspiracy. Critics often call attention to the fact that this question—"Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero"—remains unanswered and unresolved by the novel's conclusion (182). What is not given consideration often enough, however, is that both conditions—secrecy and paranoia—are not necessarily mutually exclusive as solutions to Oedipa's dilemma, but may,

Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Stalinist Russia, argued many postwar liberal intellectuals, illustrated the dangers of mass politics, of people having too great an influence over the political destiny of their nation. The desire for rationalization amongst many postwar liberals, for the application of instrumental and corporate methods to all spheres of American life, reflected the growing fear and distrust of the people and their susceptibility to demagoguery that was a vital influence on the direction of liberal social and political criticism after the war. It is particularly apparent in that strain of postwar liberalism, exemplified in the work of figures like Seymour Martin Lipset<sup>6</sup>, and H.L. Mencken (who famously described democracy as the rule of the “booboisie,”) that argued that one of the things which the experience of WWII had made clear is that a more rational and scientific approach to managing society than is offered by democratic self-government is necessary.

It was widely believed in those days that behind the War—all the death, savagery, and destruction—lay the Führer-principle. But if personalities could be replaced by abstractions of power, if techniques developed by the corporations could be brought to bear, might not nations live rationally? One of the dearest Postwar hopes: that there should be no room for a terrible disease like charisma... that its rationalization should proceed while we had the time and resources... (Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* 81)

This kind of satirical attack, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, on the ideological tendency in postwar America to “favor a powerful program over a powerful leader,” is easily recognizable as the kind of critique of the technocratic vision generally associated with postwar political theorists like C. Wright Mills, Jacques Ellul, and Herbert

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rather, be intimately linked symptoms of the dilemma itself, measures of a larger political and social system that seems able to employ both to its distinct advantage.

<sup>6</sup> See particularly: *Political Man: The Sociological Bases of Politics* (1960)

Marcuse<sup>7</sup> (81). These theorists, suspicious of the growing pragmatic, anti-ideological, and elitist tendencies of liberal thinking in postwar America, began to call attention to the widening gap between the traditional ideals of American liberalism and what Mills called the “realities of modern social structure that might serve as the means for their realization” (Mills 189).

Mill’s and Ellul’s thoughts regarding the dehumanizing and subversive effects of the instrumentalization of politics in America was greatly influenced by the theories of Max Weber, and as critics such as Joseph W. Slade and Edward Mendelson have pointed out, there is an unmistakably Weberian element to Pynchon’s work, which Pynchon underscores by not only utilizing some of Weber’s key concepts and terms (eg. rationalization and charisma), but by also alluding to him by name in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Weber feared for the very survival of liberal values in the modern world of ever larger organizations, ever expanding state apparatuses, and an ever more complex economic and political life confronting the individual. He argued that since rationalization, or the burgeoning of scientific, technological, and administrative procedures and techniques, is an inescapable and distinctive part of living in a modern industrial society, the power accrued by the experts and managers which run the bureaucracies that are an inevitable consequence of rationalization, can only be countervailed by the emergence of strong democratic leadership. These individuals, leaders whose authority is legitimated by what Weber termed “charismatic rule,” or “the authority of the exceptional, personal ‘*gift of grace*,’ [...] the entirely personal devotion to, and personal trust in, revelations, heroism, or other qualities of

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<sup>7</sup> See particularly: Mill’s *Power Elite*, Ellul’s *Technological Society*, and Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man*.

leadership in an individual” provide the best hope, according to Weber, for maintaining some sense of accountability and individual connection to the functioning of the modern state (Weber, “Vocation” 312).

Modern politics, or the politics of “the disenchanting world” for Weber, is too complex to be managed or fully understood by the mass of citizens in a democracy, and thus political participation and democratic citizenship are best understood, not as the basis for self-government or individual development, but rather as an indispensable mechanism for establishing and legitimizing competent political leaders, or dismissing the ineffective from their positions. As Weber envisioned it, in the bureaucratic state order “the only choice lies between a leadership democracy with a ‘machine’ and democracy without a leader, which means rule by the ‘professional politician’ who has no vocation, the type of man who lacks those inner, charismatic qualities which make a leader” (351).

Democracy, for Weber, is a means of maintaining something of the political in the functioning of the bureaucratic state, preserving some of the liberal freedom for individual choice and action within the rationalized world, even if only for an elite few.

It seems obvious that many of Pynchon’s satirical targets in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the unchecked growth in bureaucracy, the technocratic emphasis on expertise, technology, and secrecy, the systemic integration of government and the economy, the growing emphasis on organization and management over individualism, and the general sense of anxiety and discontent that surrounds the increasing influence and scope of technology, science, and administration in the postwar world, has much in common with both the tragic assessment of modernity

and progress expressed in the work of Weber, and the critique of postwar America liberal democracy as elitist and corporatist offered by Mills and Marcuse. Of course, it could be argued that along with his discomfort with the growing correlativity of the state, the economy, the media, and the military, Pynchon's work also often shares these theorists' penchant, particularly prevalent in Marcuse, to exaggerate the extent of that interrelation, often implying the presence of a totalizing system that is more the product of a powerful imagination than of reasonable political critique.

However, Pynchon, as far as he might go in raising the specter of totalizing tendencies in American society, never abandons political critique for a principled, but hopeless, radical skepticism or relativism as he is sometimes accused of doing, nor does his work ever relinquish its commitment to the ideal of individual liberty despite its often pessimistic assessment of the opportunities to realize or express individuality in the modern rationalized world. Pynchon's work, particularly *Vineland*, as we shall see, takes seriously the possibility of democratic renewal despite his often powerful indictment of contemporary politics, and affirms a belief in the resiliency and promise of American liberalism in the face of its demoralization and declining influence. As Edward Mendelson has written about *Gravity's Rainbow*, "the moral center of the book is the difficult but required task of recognizing the secular connectedness of the present scientific and political world—and the even more difficult requirement to act freely on the basis of that recognition" (Mendelson 145). Pynchon's suspicion that emergent forms of power in postwar America have extended beyond the management, much less the control, of traditional democratic political institutions, accounts for much of the

exaggerated tone of his political satire, but it is Pynchon's moral commitment to the ideals of individualism and democracy that guides his attempt, in *Vineland*, to reaffirm the potency of political memory, and thus reclaim conceptions of justice and progress which have, so often in American history, been the inspiration for movements committed to social and political reform.

The world that Pynchon's fiction depicts is a world in which liberal democratic values and institutions are, not just endangered and vulnerable, but rapidly being rendered anachronistic. *Vineland*, in particular, calls attention to the many ways that conceptions of democracy, justice, and progress in America have been depolitized by the evolution of the form and nature of state power in postwar America, by what political theorist Sheldon Wolin has called the "emergence of the megastate" (Wolin, "Essays" 183). The term "megastate", as Wolin defines it, "is intended to capture not only the expansion of power made possible by science and technology but also the pervasiveness of power encouraged by the new mix of public and private elements" (183). Wolin traces the theoretical argument for expanded state power in American politics back to Alexander Hamilton and his principle of the unlimited power of a sovereign people, but clearly identifies the complicated legacies of the New Deal and the economic mobilization during World War II as the fountainheads of this new form of the state<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed and convincing exploration of the many theoretical debates and contemporary political developments which provide an historical grounding for *Vineland*'s thematic interest in the evolution of state power in postwar America, ranging from "the federalist issues regarding the separation of powers, the proper role of the various branches of government, and the intent of the Constitution's framers to guarantee individual freedoms," to Roosevelt's internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII, Truman's "national security state" doctrine, and Reagan's "war" on drugs, see David Thoreen's "The President's Emergency War Powers and the Erosion of Civil Liberties in Pynchon's *Vineland*" (Thoreen 764).



For Wolin, the New Deal “was less a social than a political revolution” that brought about a dramatic shift in both the definition, and practice, of liberalism in America (22). “New Deal liberalism” with its expanded conception of state power, combined with “the experience of near-total mobilization during WW II, including the mobilization of science, universities, and private industry,” legitimated the unprecedented convergence of public and private administration which has transformed American government, and the enmeshing of the interests of the state and of the methodology of the corporation as a means of ensuring both security and the expansion of material comfort, which has come to largely define contemporary politics in America (183). In *Vineland*, Pynchon explores the evolution of the postwar political situation in America via his narrative of three generations of the Becker family, providing a dramatic portrayal of the expanding power of the “megastate” and its impact on both the individual lives of particular family members, as well as on the progressive ideals and liberal politics which are so much a part of the American, and the Becker family, tradition.

The point of convergence at which Becker family history, as it is related to us in *Vineland*, meets the story of contemporary American liberalism’s gradual repudiation of the kinds of populist and progressive commitments to economic equality, political reform, and social justice that defined liberal hopes in America for more than half a century, is the postwar fate of the American labor movement. The American trade union movement in the immediate pre-war era, as Pynchon depicts it through the stories told to Frenesi by her mother Sasha, was a vibrant, active and growing movement. Profoundly angered by her father’s crippling at the hands of Croker “Bud” Scantling, a member of an anti-union organization called

the “Employers’ Association,” Sasha leaves home and settles in a “rip-roaring union town, still riding the waves of euphoria from the General Strike of ‘34” and proceeds to involve herself in the local labor struggles (Pynchon, *Vineland* 77).

Growing up, Frenesi heard stories of those prewar times, the strike at the Stockton cannery, strikes over Ventura sugar beets, Venice lettuce, San Joaquin cotton... of the anticonscription movement in Berkely... Somewhere Sasha also found time to work for Tom Mooney’s release, fight the infamous antipicket ordinance, Proposition One, and campaign for Culbert Olsen in ’38. (77)

Then WW II came along and, as Sasha recounts to Frenesi, for herself and for the labor movement,

[t]he war changed everything. The deal was, no strikes for the duration. Lot of us thought it was some last desperate capitalist maneuver, a way to get the Nation mobilized under a Leader, no different than Hitler or Stalin. But at the same time, so many of us really loved FDR. (77)

American labor did indeed enter into economic arrangements with business and government in the interests of mobilization and wartime production. FDR had set the stage for such co-operation by passing legislation such as the National Labor Relations Act, which guaranteed collective bargaining rights for workers, and by creating the National Labor Relations Board, which was given the authority to police unfair labor practices.

When the need to mobilize for war arose, Roosevelt sought to greatly strengthen this New Deal tripartite partnership between government, capital, and labor in order to provide economic stability and promote the increased production necessary to accomplish the massive task of preparing for war. The theory was that both business and labor would subordinate their own interests under the direction of the government in order to serve the larger interests of the public

good. However, as the activist state of the New Deal evolved into a warfare state, it was the interests of capital that dominated much of the agenda and policies of the War Industries Board, the bureaucratic entity which oversaw the bulk of America's mobilization effort, largely because the agency was staffed "almost entirely from the private sector, relying on lawyers, businessmen, and financiers (many of them drawn directly from the industries they were then called upon to regulate)" (Brinkley 83).

Labor was never able to achieve anything like equal standing in this wartime partnership, while capital, able to dominate and manipulate the central mobilization agencies, reaped enormous profits and solidified their influence over the regulatory mechanisms and bureaucracy of the New Deal state. Thus Hub Gates, Sasha's husband and Frenesi's father, returning from fighting the war, confronts a vastly different political situation in America, a situation in which the wartime arrangements between government and capital provided the framework for a postwar state and a brand of liberal politics that was explicitly antiunion.

Participating in one of the wave of postwar strikes, Hub is confronted with this new political reality for progressivism and for labor:

The struggle between the IATSE [International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees], a creature of organized crime in collusion with the studio, and Herb Sorell's Conference of Studio Unions, unapologetically liberal, progressive, New Deal, socialist, and thus, in the toxic political situation, "Communist," had been going on all through the war but now broke into the open in a series of violent strike actions against the studios. All the newspapers pretended it was an organizing dispute between two unions. In fact it was the dark recrudescence of that hard-cased antiunion tradition which brought the movie business to California in the first place, where it had gone on to enjoy till only recently its free ride on the backs of cheap labor. The minute this was threatened, in came the studio-created scab locals of IATSE and their soldiers, often in

battalion strength. And the outcome was foredoomed, because of the blacklist. In one of American misoneism's most notable hours, a complex system of accusation, judgement, and disposition, administered by figures like Roy Brewer of IATSE and Ronald Reagan of the Screen Actors Guild, controlled the working lives of everyone in the industry who'd ever taken a step leftward of registering to vote as a Democrat. (Pynchon, *Vineland* 289-90)

The clear contrast between the co-opted and fragmented situation of organized labor in postwar America reflected in the above passage, and Frenesi's Wobbly grandfather Jess Traverse's pre-war "dream of One Big Union" (76) is an indication of just how much the political landscape had shifted in America following the war. In particular, it is evidence of Pynchon's keen awareness of the crippling effect that McCarthyism, and the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act—a piece of legislation which confirmed that the kind of political influence enjoyed by business interests during the war, vis-à-vis the wartime economic partnership with the state, would continue to dominate public life in the postwar period—had on the labor movement in America. Historian Nelson Lichtenstein describes the impact and importance of the Taft-Hartley Act when he argues that:

Passage of the Taft-Hartley Act over President Truman's veto provided a milestone not only for the actual legal restrictions the new law imposed on the trade unions, but as a symbol of the shifting relationship between the unions and the state during the late 1940s. The law sought to curb the practice of interunion solidarity, eliminate the radical cadre who still held influence within trade union ranks, and contain the labor movement to roughly its existing geographic and demographic terrain. [...] Union leaders correctly recognized that the act represented the definitive end of the brief era in which the state served as an arena in which the trade unions could bargain for the kind of tripartite accommodation with industry that had been so characteristic of the New Deal years. (133-34)

Stripped of its most powerful organizational tools by Taft-Hartley, and ideologically neutered by the chilling effect of the cold war on American domestic

politics, labor began to abandon its progressive political agenda as unions shifted their focus towards solidifying their institutional positions and seeking higher wages for their members. More or less abdicating the reformist and socially democratic ideals that defined it in the prewar period, American organized labor had been reduced from an active and expanding progressive force on the American political scene before the war, to the status of a mere special-interest group lobbying for the attention of the “broker-state” after it. Pynchon abstracts the story of the postwar liberal repudiation of the progressive struggle against corporate capitalism with Hub Gates’s summarization of his own short personal story: “I let the world slip away, made my shameful peace, joined the IA, retired soon’s I could, sold off my only real fortune—my precious anger—for a lot of got-damn shadows” (Pynchon 1990 291).

The kind of progressive and social democratic politics which animated labor-liberalism in the prewar period, but had been driven to the margins of the American political scene by that period, which followed the war, characterized by ideological conservatism, Keynesian economics, the anti-communist excesses of McCarthyism, and the demoralization of liberalism, reappeared with a vengeance on the national political scene in the 1960’s with the civil rights movement, the emergence of the New Left, and the explosion of political radicalism on the campuses of America’s universities. Certainly, Pynchon’s sympathy with the democratic and progressive impulses and ideals of the sixties “revolution” can be strongly felt in *Vineland*. It is, however, a novel that squarely confronts the failure of those impulses, the corruption of the democratic ideals of what came to be known as the “New Left” by both radical and conservative forces within America,

and the waning commitment of a generation caught up in the wave of consumerism, prosperity, and the promise of personal freedom, that appeared to offer a more immediate road to self-fulfillment than political activism seemed to—a development allegorized in *Vineland* primarily by the co-option of Frenesi Gates at the hands of Brock Vond.

Brock Vond's obsession with conformity and order is certainly depicted as out of control and destructive in *Vineland*, but to describe Vond's maniacal and authoritarian behavior as representative of something like the "the conservative communitarian values that dominate American domestic and foreign policy from the late sixties through to the early nineties," not only distorts a very complex and wide body of communitarian thought, but ascribes to Vond political motivations that Pynchon goes out of his way to discount (Varsava 79).<sup>9</sup> Vond is, strictly speaking, no ideologue, nor does he necessarily, at core, act out of political principle, but rather, as Pynchon makes clear, he is, fundamentally, little more than a lackey, a keen and over-zealous errand boy with his nose pressed up against the window of the halls of real power. Just what motivates "Mad Dog Vond" is no mystery in *Vineland*, or at least it is a question that Pynchon seems to deal with rather directly.

He'd caught a fatal glimpse of that level where everybody knew everybody else, where however political fortunes below might bloom and die, the same people, the Real Ones, remained year in and year out, keeping what was desirable flowing their way. Prosecutor Vond wanted a life there, only slowly coming to understand that for someone of his background there would be no route to this but self-abasement, fawning, gofering, scrambling for

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<sup>9</sup> Cyrus K. Patell also sees Brock Vond as representative of a "coercive, majoritarian, and bad" strain of communitarianism, but also recognizes a "voluntary, pluralist, and good" form of communitarianism represented in the figure of Zoyd Wheeler (173). What is at stake in the rivalry between Vond and Zoyd, for Patell, is a battle between these two forms of communitarianism.

tips and offering other such hints of his eagerness to be brevetted on life's battlefield to a rank higher than he would ever, by the terms of his enlistment, have deserved. Though his defects of character were many, none was quite as annoying as this naked itch to be a gentleman, kept inflamed by a stubborn denial of what everybody else knew—that no matter how much money he made, how many political offices or course credits from charm school might come his way, no one of those among whom he wished to belong would ever regard him as other than a thug whose services had been hired. (276)

Vond is such a disturbing character, not because he is the manifestation of “the evil power-death-tech-government-official-reality politics of our age,” but because he represents a classic, though perverted, story of American aspiration, a “provincial whiz kid” yearning to be a gentleman (Porush 38). Brock Vond is a kind of Jay Gatsby of the technocratic age, a Machiavellian figure whose frustrated desire to be amongst the powerful elite leads him to embrace, rather than resist, the power system that torments him, rejects him, and inevitably leads to his undoing. That Brock Vond, devotee of Lombrosian “misoneism”<sup>10</sup>, soldier of the political backlash and instrument of control, should ultimately be betrayed by the source of his own power—state bureaucracy—indicates just how problematic, for Pynchon, politics has become in the age of the megastate.

Complicating the political dynamics raised by the fate of Brock Vond in the novel, is the disturbing ease with which Vond is able to convince Frenesi, a member of a family steeped in the history of the progressive struggles of the American left, to participate in his plan to destroy “The People’s Republic of Rock and Roll,” perhaps the central representative of 60’s revolutionary ideals and spirit

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<sup>10</sup> What really got his [Vond’s] attention was the Lombrosian [criminologist Cesare Lombroso (1836-1909)] concept of ‘misoneism.’ Radicals, militants, revolutionaries, however they styled themselves, all sinned against this deep organic human principle, which Lombroso had named after the Greek for ‘hatred of anything new.’ (Pynchon, *Vineland* 272-273)



in the novel. Some critics, including Joseph Tabbi, have suggested that Brock Vond was able to turn Frenesi “mainly through the force of his sex” (Tabbi 96). However, Frenesi herself, at the very moment when Brock makes his pitch for her to betray her friends and her ideals and help him bring about the dismantling of PR3, suggests a different reason, a motive that has very little, if not nothing at all, to do with Brock himself—

She understood as clearly as she could allow herself to what Brock wanted to do, understood at last, dismally, that she might even do it—not for him, unhappy fucker, but because she had lost too much control, time was running all around her, these were rapids, and as far ahead as she could see it looked like Brock’s stretch of river, another stage, like sex, children, surgery, further into adulthood perilous and real, into the secret that life is soldiering. (Pynchon, *Vineland* 216)

Frenesi is not captivated by Brock’s sexual prowess, at least not enough to betray her friends, but her desire for control, for order, for the stability that Brock represents, compels her to accept his perverse conception of duty, and fulfill her role in the larger system, as just another log making its way—and here Pynchon extends the water motif of the above passage—“down the river to the sawmill, to get sawed into lumber, to be built into more America” (216).

In *Vineland*, Pynchon draws attention to this weakness, not just in Frenesi Gates, but also in the sixties revolutionary movement as a whole. The generation which marched against the war in Vietnam, protested inequality and injustice in all its forms, that rediscovered and fought for all manner of progressive and liberal social causes was, finally, unable to resist the temptations that economic prosperity and consumerism offered, eventually acquiescing to the conceptions of justice and progress which the new era of political economy demanded. In the end, Pynchon

seems to judge the revolutionary spirit of the sixties and early seventies as hopeful and full of noble intentions, but too immature and self-indulgent to do little more than moderate the growing postwar trend in America to fashion its politics around the apolitical imperatives of economic rationality—mainly stability, prosperity, and the centralization of power.

In fact, Pynchon goes so far as to suggest that the sixties revolution may just have been a particular variation of that deeply felt desire for security and continuity that eventually propelled Reagan and the neo-conservatives to power in the eighties:

Brock Vond's genius was to have seen in the activities of the sixties left not threats to order but unacknowledged desires for it. While the Tube was proclaiming youth revolutions against parents of all kinds and most viewers were accepting this story, Brock saw the deep—if he'd allowed himself to feel it, the sometimes touching—need to stay children forever, safe inside some extended national Family. (269)

The discontent and alienation that Vond detects as the driving force of so much of the politics of the New Left is a sign of social crisis, an indication of the break down of civil society. Vond recognizes in a generation of young Americans looking to the public sphere for a sense of belonging and security that used to be derived from private associations—from family, neighborhoods, and friends—a personal and political vulnerability, an opportunity to redefine the boundaries of state power.

References to family and community ties are plentiful in *Vineland*, one would guess in response to the rhetoric about “family values” typically offered by neo-conservatives. “We know already how much all you Reaganite folks care about the family unit, just from how much you’re always fuckin’ around with it,”

is Zoyd Wheeler's response to government agent Hector Zuñiga's conversational inquiry concerning his daughter's welfare (30-31). It is a response that highlights the divide between the "traditional values" celebrated by Reagan and his disciples, and the growing disciplinary functions of state apparatuses, especially the agencies of law enforcement, under Reagan's presidency. This, combined with developments in surveillance technologies<sup>11</sup>, further serves to compromise the distinction between the public and private realms, a distinction fundamental to traditional liberal conceptions, both of the level of autonomy available in civil society, and of the limits of state power.

Like Vond, Reagan traded on the desire for order, continuity, and security, but defined that desire in terms consistent with a conception of progress rooted in unlimited economic growth and the enhancement, rather than the dismantling, of state coercive power. Reaganism promotes a vision of America it claims is conservative but, as Pynchon portrays it, its policies represent less a commitment to "traditional values" than the promotion of those forces that pose the greatest threat to America's democratic tradition of civil society—the interests of business. For Pynchon, Reagan's real vision was of America as a "pacified territory,"

Reclaimed by the enemy for a timeless, defectively imagined future of zero-tolerance drug free Americans all pulling their weight and all locked in to the official economy, inoffensive music, endless family specials on the Tube, church all week long, and, on special days, for extra-good behavior, maybe a cookie. (221-222)

Under Reagan, as *Vineland* makes clear, the idea of progress as the reflection of the hope for social justice and equality that gave rise to most of the significant

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<sup>11</sup> During a rant Flash, Frenesi's husband and fellow government informer, argues that "Everybody's a squealer. We're in th'Info Revolution here. Anytime you use a credit card you're tellin' the Man more than you meant to. Don't matter if it's big or small, he can use it all" (74).

reform movements in American history, has been all but transformed from a political into an economic notion. Progress, in the Reagan years, is made synonymous with the forces of modernization, with technology, economic growth, managerialism, and the growing interconnection between the public and private sectors, between state and corporate administration. Where once the Left in America was committed to progress as the promise of political democracy, the forces of the Right now embrace it as the promise of limitless economic expansion. Pynchon spends most of *Vineland* lamenting this transformation, but in the final chapter he offers a response to it, a response rooted in the principle that, to borrow a comment made by Christopher Lasch, “Hope does not demand a belief in progress. It demands a belief in justice” (Lasch 80).

#### Emerson in *Vineland*: Pynchon and the “Principle of Compensation”

“Justice?—You get justice in the next world, in this world you have the law” (Gaddis 13). This sentence, which William Gaddis’ uses to begin his 1994 novel *A Frolic of His Own*, a biting satire of contemporary America’s litigation-mad society, sets up a distinction between justice and the law that brings to mind what Emerson, in his essay “Compensation,” calls “the doctrine of the Last Judgment” (*Essays* 57). Recalling a church sermon he recently attended, Emerson relates the conception of justice offered by the preacher:

He assumed that judgment is not executed in this world; that the wicked are successful; that the good are miserable; and then urged from reason and from Scripture a compensation to be made to both parties in the next life. No offence appeared to be taken by the congregation at this doctrine. As far as I could observe, when the

meeting broke up, they separated without remark on the sermon.  
(57)

Gaddis' novel portrays a society in which the expectation of justice is no longer an aspect of the law, where the law has become an instrument of vindication, of resentment, of greed, of power, and even of self-definition, but it would appear, no longer an expression of any faith in the realization of justice. That, according to the lawyers in Gaddis's novel, and to Emerson's preacher, will have to wait for the next world.

There is, for Emerson, a "fallacy" inherent in this kind of preaching and in the conception of justice that it propounds, which lies in "the immense concession that the bad are successful; that justice is not done now" (58). The preacher, as Emerson sees it, perverts the notion of justice by defining just compensation in terms more consistent with delayed material gratification than any principle of retribution (58). "The ones showing up in court demanding justice," one of Gaddis' characters tells us, "all they've got their eye on's that million dollar price tag" (13). In the age of political economy, the limits of justice are defined, not by hope and faith, but by economic reality, by what Emerson calls the "base estimate of the market of what constitutes a manly success" (*Essays* 58). If the hope for justice is reducible to little more than the belief that the success enjoyed by unprincipled people in this world will be visited on the principled in the next; then the law, unconstrained by any theology of deferred gratification, is free to define just compensation in purely practical and economic terms.

Gaddis portrays legal processes in contemporary America as compromised, co-opted, and often ridiculous: "Only justice! As a farce yes, play it as farce

because that's what it is isn't it!" (Gaddis 485). Pynchon seems largely to concur with this view, and indeed, in *Vineland*, the law is presented as a caricature of justice, a burlesque of bureaucracy, corruption and political power played out in the courtrooms, jail cells, and government offices across America. Certainly Brock Vond's police state tactics and the basic disregard for civil and constitutional rights, which justice officers at all levels of government display in *Vineland*, are suggestive enough of Pynchon's cynicism concerning the state of the justice system in America<sup>12</sup>. Nevertheless, the vision of justice with which Pynchon concludes his novel is one that reaffirms, not just the possibility of retributive justice, but also its inescapability. It is a vision that suggests that while the state may undeniably be the central instrument of justice in the contemporary world, a much older conception of justice, as a principle of everyday life that exists outside of the state's laws and authority, however corrupt and authoritarian, is also at work.

This vision of an inexorable justice is invoked by Pynchon via Jess Traverse and his yearly recitation of a passage from Emerson at the annual Traverse-Becker family reunion:

It was the heart of this gathering meant to honor the bond between Eula Becker and Jess Traverse, that lay beneath, defined, and made sense of them all, distributed from Marin to Seattle, Coos Bay to downtown Butte, choker setters and choppers, dynamiters of fish, shingle weavers and street-corner spellbinders, old and beaten at, young and brand-new, they all kept an eye on the head of the table, where Jess and Eula sat together, each year smaller and more

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<sup>12</sup> In his article, "The State Law Enforcement Apparatus as America: Authority, Arbitrariness, and the 'Force of Law' in *Vineland*," Richard E. Burket looks at *Vineland*'s portrayal of the legal system, and particularly at Pynchon's critique of the notion of the law as a "neutral, disinterested regulatory process," calling attention to the various ways that Pynchon dramatizes "the role that force, power, and interpretation play in the operation of the legal system" by focusing on the often arbitrary and politically and economically interested nature of the enforcement of the law and the application of "legally sanctioned" force in postwar America (729-730).

transparent, waiting for Jess's annual reading of a passage from Emerson he'd found and memorized years ago, quoted in a jailhouse copy of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, by William James. Frail as the fog of Vineland, in his carrying, pure voice, Jess reminded them, "Secret retributions are always restoring the level, when disturbed, of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam. All the tyrants and proprietors and monopolists of the world in vain set their shoulders to heave the bar. Settles forever the ponderous equator to its line, and man and mote, state and sun, must range to it, or be pulverized by the recoil." (369)

There is an inclination amongst many critics to interpret Pynchon's appeal to this rather vivid moral doctrine as largely ironic, as a tongue-in-cheek reference to a theological or utopian vision whose function, if anything, is only to emphasize the glaring lack of real social justice in America that his novel highlights. For Barbara Pittman, Jess's recitation is little more than an empty distraction, the observance of a ritual whose substance is so out of context and so irrelevant to the lives and experiences of the Traverse-Becker clan that "in all these years, apparently, no one has considered it necessary or advantageous to find the primary source" (Pittman 47). Jerry Varsava finds irony in the disjunction between what he sees as the implications of the passage as "an apology for political quietism," and Jess Traverse's dedicated political activism throughout his life. For Varsava, in Jess Traverse's mouth at least, "these words promote not complacency but the application of a neo-Emersonian optimism to the active pursuit of liberal ideals" (92).

For those who, unlike the Traverse-Beckers, feel it important to trace the passage through William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* back to its original source in Emerson's essay "The Sovereignty of Ethics," the moral



sentiment of the quotation, as well as Jess Traverse's attraction to it, are issues made more, rather than less, relevant to a full understanding of the novel. Pittman's puzzlement over just what imbues Jess's recitation with such power, and why the Traverse-Beckers "meet every year just to hear old Jess read someone else's quotation from Emerson," is perhaps best addressed by William James himself when he praises the sentences from Emerson which he is about to quote as being "as fine as anything in literature" (Pittman 47; James 33). It is as much the eloquence of the expression of faith, as its exemplification of the "Emersonian religion," that compels James to call attention to the passage, and it seems reasonable that what James calls "the inner experiences that underlie such expressions of faith as this and impel the writer to their utterance," whether the utterance being quoted is from a primary or secondary source, would command the attention of the Traverse-Becker clan as firmly as it does James's (33).

Pittman's implied point, however, concerning the incongruence of the circumstances in which the passage appears in the novel, and the context in which Jess Traverse is said to have come across it in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, takes us more directly to the heart of the matter. James quotes the passage in order to both broaden the definition of religious experience he intends to discuss, and to prepare the way for his assigning Emerson to what he calls the "once-born" type of religious consciousness, a category James uses to designate a sensibility "with no element of morbid compunction or crisis," a kind of temperament "organically weighted on the side of cheer and fatally forbidden to linger, as those of opposite temperament linger, over the darker aspects of the universe" (82-83). The passage is exemplary, for James, of Emerson's

unacquaintedness with morbid thoughts and his lack of awareness of evil, of the practical limitations of his optimism and the fragility of his position when confronted with real adversity. Considering the life that Jess Traverse has led, his personal and political confrontations with injustice, suffering, and hardship—after all we are told that he comes across the passage while in jail—his unshaken faith in Emerson's vision of "divine justice" and "secret retributions" appears too excessively sanguine and submissive, too much an expression of naïve belief, to be anything other than ironic.

If, however, we read Emerson's, and thereby Jess Traverse's, declaration of faith in the "principle of compensation," as critics such as Christopher Lasch, Stanley Cavell, and David M. Robinson suggest, not as a symptom of political quietism, optimism, or a quasi-pathological cheerfulness<sup>13</sup>, but rather as a kind of moral pragmatism, then what Prairie at one point calls "this belief they [her parents] always had in some higher justice" offers to take us in a different, less ironic, direction (Pynchon, *Vineland* 366). Lasch argues that it is "justice and hope, not optimism," that Emerson preached, and it is in this spirit that Jess Traverse's yearly recitation should be understood.

Rather than being a negation of human action, Emerson's doctrine that "every secret is told, every crime is punished, every virtue rewarded, every wrong redressed, in silence and certainty," affirms the moral act in the face of necessity (Emerson 62). Fate, as Emerson conceives it, is experienced as the limitation imposed on human freedom by nature, as the inescapable measure of human action

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<sup>13</sup> "In some individuals optimism may become quasi-pathological. The capacity for even a transient sadness or a momentary humility seems cut off from them as by a kind of congenital anaesthesia" (James 83).

by the demands of virtue. It is a doctrine that Lasch outlines elegantly in his book

*The True and Only Heaven* when he writes:

Real insight lies in the knowledge that nature will prevail in the long run. Submission, not defiance, is the way of true virtue; but Emerson's idea of submission carries no hint of weakness or passivity. 'Loving resignation' has nothing in common with cowardice or timidity or with the complaint that we are helpless, blameless victims of circumstance. [...] Rightly understood, it is a 'fatal courage,' an 'energy of will,' an 'ecstatic,' 'heroic' affirmation of life that transforms necessity into freedom precisely by acknowledging its fitness and beauty as well as its inescapability. Submission implies a willingness to accept fate not only as limitation but as justice. (Lasch 264)

This acceptance of the necessity of limits, which Emerson himself calls "a doctrine of unspeakable comfort," is not reducible to a facile optimism, determinism, or fatalism, but rather functions, for Emerson, as a repository of moral courage and energy which can be harnessed, as David M. Robinson puts it, "to transform a condition of limit into a springboard of power" (5).

But does this vision of justice, with its colors of Calvinist theology, offer any political insight, or is Varsava right to argue that it is simply a harmless optimism that Pynchon, tongue firmly in his cheek, grafts onto the liberal political ideals that Jess Traverse represents? Irving Howe, himself a staunch leftist, strikes a decidedly skeptical note when, discussing the interpretation of Emersonian compensation offered by Harold Bloom in his 1984 article "Mr. America" in *The New York Review*, he writes:

Emerson's notion of "compensation" has been defended by Harold Bloom, who cites a sentence from the older Emerson saying it means "nothing is got for nothing." Yes; but more characteristic is this remark of the early Emerson: 'There is always some levelling circumstance that puts down the overbearing, the strong, the rich, the fortunate, substantially on the same ground with others.' Perhaps death does that; but short of death what could Emerson

have meant? As one who has spent a good part of his life looking for the 'levelling circumstance' of which Emerson speaks, I can only report that thus far it has steadily eluded me. (Howe 14)

It is impossible, for Howe, to reconcile Emerson's notion of the "leveling" or "vindictive" circumstance with the unequal distribution of wealth and social injustice that he sees and experiences all around him. Bloom's synopsis of the principle of compensation in the maxim "nothing is got for nothing," or as Emerson also puts it "in Nature nothing can be given, all things are sold," offers for Howe, very little moral or philosophical guidance, and even less comfort, in the presence of the pain and imparity of human experience (Emerson 65). For Christopher Lasch, however, what Emerson's principle of compensation is tapping into is what he calls "the producer ideology of Anglo-American populism," a kind of combination of middle-class political morality and the "expression of the folk wisdom that condemns every attempt to get something for nothing" (265; 270).

That there is a price to pay for everything is a rather pragmatic moral sentiment that, according to Lasch, Emerson transposes from the ideology and political economy of populism. American Populism, preoccupied with the corrupting influence of commerce on politics, with the condemnation of the abuse of, not the desire for, wealth and power, and with the immorality of "unearned income," embraced a sense of morality drawn from the wisdom gained through the daily experience of economic exchange. Often fusing Jeffersonian liberalism, Protestant ethics, and Jacksonian producerism, Populism struggled to oppose the powerful ideological and economic forces of progress and limitless material expansion by defining its struggle of "the people" against "the interests" as moral, as well as political. The values of commerce, understood by the populists as

commensurate with the responsibilities of citizenship and the principle of individual freedom, provide a powerful language that Emerson utilizes to express what Lasch calls his “theology of producerism.”

Always pay; for, first or last, you must pay your entire debt.  
Persons and events may stand for a time between you and justice,  
but it is only a postponement. You must pay at last your own debt.  
If you are wise, you will dread a prosperity which only loads you  
with more. Benefit is the end of nature. But for every benefit  
which you receive, a tax is levied. (Emerson 68)

In this regard it is significant, for our understanding of the political perspective of both *Vineland* and Emerson, that prominent amongst Emerson’s list of those who “in vain set their shoulders to heave the bar,” are “proprietors and monopolists.”

Neither Emerson, nor certainly Pynchon via Jess Traverse, denies the reality of injustice. In fact, what the principle of compensation provides is a vision of nature, of fate, and of virtue with which to face injustice. Howe himself, while certainly skeptical about the validity of Emerson’s notion of a “levelling circumstance,” nevertheless admits spending a good part of his life looking and hoping for it. Jess Traverse, by evoking Emerson each year, reaffirms his belief that injustice is not the inevitable way of things, that justice is a present and vital force in the world. For Emerson there is, in our daily experience, enough evidence of his “perfectionist” understanding of justice, to hearten us, to keep us from despair, and, if necessary, in Stanley Cavell’s terms, to provide “Hope Against Hope.”

Howe argues that the notion of compensation was Emerson’s personal bulwark against his own skepticism and private disillusionment, which as Howe tells it, were largely the consequence of his social conscience and political

engagement.<sup>14</sup> Deeply troubled by the continued presence of slavery, and outraged by events such as the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law, Emerson, while never abandoning his skepticism regarding political and social reform, was “forced by conscience,” and by “the moral urgency which the struggle over slavery took on,” to become more active in the anti-slavery movement (Howe 76-77). It is this yielding to his public obligations, the frustrating and discouraging experience of active involvement in the struggle against the social, political, and institutional injustices of his day, that Howe believes pushed Emerson’s idealism to near-exhaustion. It was the political realm, according to Howe, that put Emerson face-to-face with “the spiritual tokens of nihilism that lurks at the bottom of everything, not to be explored” (79).

There is something of this spiritual exhaustion in the air at the Traverse-Becker reunion, as various generations of the family come together to give voice to their well-earned and well-worn political cynicism:

And other grandfolks could be heard arguing the perennial question of whether the United States still lingered in a prefascist twilight, or whether that darkness had fallen long stupefied years ago. [...] One by one, as other voices joined in, the names began—some shouted, some accompanied by spit, the old reliable names good for hours of contention, stomach distress, and insomnia—Hitler, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Nixon, Hoover, Mafia, CIA, Reagan, Kissinger, that collection of names and their tragic interweaving that stood not constellated above in any nightwade remoteness of light, but below, diminished to the last unfaceable American secret, to be pressed, each time deeper, again and again beneath the meanest of random soles, one blackly fermenting leaf of the forest floor that nobody wanted to turn over, because of all that lived, virulent, waiting, just beneath. (Pynchon *Vineland* 371-372)

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<sup>14</sup> In his essay “Irving Howe: The Left in the Reagan Era,” Leo Marx argues that Howe’s rather sympathetic depiction of Emerson as a disillusioned idealist “expresses the pathos of the American left in the Reagan age. It brings to mind Howe’s account of his own enervating service to the idea of socialism,” and is indicative of “his loss of confidence in the future of the left in America” (347).

Such a pessimistic understanding of history and politics might appear to exist rather uncomfortably beside Emerson's principle of compensation, but in Emerson's will to believe that justice will prevail, maintained in the face of the experience of injustice, and without denying the tragic elements of history, Lasch, Cavell, Howe, and it would seem Pynchon, recognize the essentially practical capacity to assert a moral vision of hope in a climate of skepticism and despair. For Lasch, Emerson's determination to "assert the goodness of life in the face of its limits," offers a template with which "to recover a more vigorous form of hope" which "in the troubled times to come," Lasch tells us, we will need "even more than we needed it in the past" (530). Stanley Cavell points out that "when Emerson teaches that actions we take to define our lives [...] should be taken in hope and on such claim to authority as only we alone, in our uncertainty, can bring to it, he is teaching what Kant called practical wisdom" (Cavell 138). And Howe, while wary of what he perceives as the sentimental and nostalgic elements of Emerson's politics, nevertheless finds in Emerson's voice, confident and ever counseling against despondency, a call to be resilient in one's aspirations, to respond to the tragedy of circumstance with the patience of hope. But "Patience? After all these bitter years?" Howe quarrels rhetorically. In answer to which, as if in conversation, he imagines Emerson calling our attention to the final lines of his essay "Experience": "Darkened with the knowledge of loss, he [Emerson] speaks again: 'Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat; up again, old heart!—it seems to say—there is victory yet for all justice'" (Howe 89).



Pynchon enacts something akin to what Cavell calls the “conversation of justice” in *Vineland*, a dialogue that inhabits the gap between the present condition of justice in society and an ideal of perfect justice, which according to Cavell, functions as an essential internal criticism of democracy<sup>15</sup>. This conversation, which, in the novel, finds its arena in the conceptual space of the Traverse-Becker reunion, a territory demarcated by Pynchon between the Emersonian perfectionism of Jess Traverse, and the despondency of the American left in the Reagan era, reveals both the many fronts on which American democracy has failed to bring about a just society, as well as the continuity and resiliency of the hope sustained by the founding link between democratic aspiration and the possibility of justice, though specific events push that hope to the brink of exhaustion. The critics that find only irony or a parody of facile optimism in Jess Traverse’s Emersonian vision of justice consider his evocation of the principle of compensation to be rather wistful and sanguine, but against the powerful portrayal of debased justice that pervades most of the novel, an instance of almost farcical credulity. Having taken pains to paint so vivid a picture of injustice in America, surely Pynchon cannot be participating in a “conversation of justice” which takes seriously such a utopian vision. Thus, having rejected the possibility of a Pollyanna Pynchon, such critics leave, as the only plausible modes with which to account for the Emersonian evocation in *Vineland*, the skeptical withdrawal of irony or the mock apologetics of parody.

However, it is exactly these two responses to the debasement of justice—withdrawal and apology—that a democratic “conversation of justice” rejects.

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<sup>15</sup> For a view of Jess Traverse’s Emersonianism as less perfectionism and more “transcendental dogmatism” see David Dickson’s *The Utterance of America* (164).

Varsava is certainly correct to point out that, “Pynchon parodies facile optimism in the conclusion to *Vineland* when Prairie, an innocent in distress, is rescued from the dastardly clutches of Brock Vond,” though he reveals only part of its significance when he offers this incident as proof of Pynchon’s assertion in the novel that “justice is not inevitable” (Varsava 93). The debased kind of perfect justice that Pynchon parodies is as much an indication of the usefulness and necessity of a perfectionism vigorous enough to be compatible with democracy, as it is a rejection of the facile kind of perfectionism which Varsava identifies with “Hollywood’s happy-ending syndrome” (93).

False perfectionism, as Cavell points out, invites a cynical response that in turn, unless one is willing to abandon democratic aspiration to cynical resignation, must be countered by hope. Cavell argues that “the mission of Perfectionism generally, in a world of false (and false calls for) democracy, is the discovery of the possibility of democracy, which to exist has recurrently to be (re)discovered” (Cavell 16-17). Emersonian Perfectionism, because it invites us to not only look for, but expect, justice in this world, to assert, without cynicism, the moral imperative of justice in a world which appears to be dominated by the inevitable compromises and failures of democracy, is, for Cavell, a perfectionism which should be understood “not only to be compatible with democracy, but its prize” (28). As a democrat, Emerson understands the virtue of political and social criticism, whether based on cynicism or perfectionism, to be an affirmation of democratic faith, an acknowledgment of the possibility of democracy intrinsic in the choice to continue to participate in a conversation of justice that “only makes sense on the assumption of democracy as our life and our aspiration” (Cavell 138).

As a liberal, Emerson yields to the urgency of the struggle for social reform, to the moral necessity of engaging the political realm, with a hopefulness rooted in his faith in justice and progress, but without denying the skepticism demanded by the experience of injustice, and the respect for the limits placed on progress by what he referred to as Nature. David M. Robinson argues that, “the spirit of ‘Compensation,’ [...] was crucial to Emerson, for it allowed him to take a tragic view of history while he maintained at the same time his belief in inevitable progress” (35). Judith Shklar locates the limits of Emerson’s skepticism in the moral sentiments of liberal democracy—“The public religion of Emerson’s America was the faith in progress, real moral and political advance. Democracy depended on it. Emerson could not dismiss that faith” (*Redeeming* 60). Whether one argues that Emerson’s commitment to liberalism constituted the moral boundary of his skepticism à la Howe and Shklar, or that his skepticism concerning progress constituted the limit of his liberal commitment à la Robinson and Lasch, it is clear that Emerson’s liberalism, particularly his pragmatic determination to preach resolution rather than resignation as the virtuous response to the experience of the limitations of human endeavor, had recourse to a belief in an ideal of justice vigorous enough to contend with the disappointment and defeat that defines such a large part of human experience.

Thus, justice, for Emerson, is not only something which one hopes for, or expects, or believes in, but it also something which one works for, earns, and for which one pays a price. Whatever amplitude of insight and hope that the principle of compensation might offer is earned and affirmed as part of the experience and struggle of everyday life. As if to reinforce exactly this point, Jess Traverse

concludes his reading from Emerson by offering an example of the principle of compensation from his own experience—

‘And if you don’t believe Ralph Waldo Emerson [...] ask Crocker ‘Bud’ Scantling,’ the head of the Lumber Association whose life of impunity for arranging to drop the tree on Jess had ended abruptly down on 101 not far from here when he’d driven his week-old BMW into an oncoming chip truck at a combined speed of about 150. (Pynchon *Vineland* 369)

Jess Traverse, as a lifelong laborer, and servant of the struggle for social justice, recognizes in Emerson’s principle of compensation a moral doctrine that affirms his conviction in the promise of American liberal democracy. It lends meaning to the hardship and adversity, to the sacrifices and effort, experienced first hand in the novel by Jess Traverse, which has been the price paid in the past, and which will certainly be the cost in the future, for the advancement of justice. Jess Traverse, and perhaps Pynchon himself, draws hope and comfort from Emerson’s passage, not because Emerson preaches a facile optimism or convenient quietism in the face of difficult and disheartening circumstances, but because he challenges those circumstances with his conviction, by affirming his faith in what is an uncompromising and demanding conception of justice. David M. Robinson cautions us that it is important not to underestimate “the extent to which he [Emerson] had come to address political reform, daily experience, work, and community as the keys to his moral vision” (7). While it would certainly be overreaching to argue that Pynchon has taken on board, in toto, this Emersonian moral vision, one should not underestimate the extent to which Pynchon, for moral, political, and pragmatic reasons, feels compelled to consider it, to respond to his own disillusionment and pessimism by taking seriously the hope for justice,

and the belief in democratic progress, which has, to a large extent, characterized the tradition of reform movements in American politics.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **“The Real American Crazy Shit”: Democratic Individuality in Philip Roth’s “American Trilogy”**

Is it naïve to continue to take seriously, in an age of identity politics, culture wars, and post-Enlightenment skepticism, the promise of self-invention, self-creation, and self-discovery offered by the heroic conception of America formulated in the Declaration of Independence and promoted throughout American history by figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr.? Is it dangerous? Philip Roth’s “American trilogy,” consisting of *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000) raises and revisits many issues, both literary and political, which necessarily cluster around the ongoing and distinctly American dialogue of individuality, particularly as it continues to shape America and the American sense of identity as the twentieth century gives way to the twenty-first. The stage setting for Roth’s fictional project encompasses some of the most pivotal events of postwar American political history, including the anti-communist excesses of the McCarthy era, the politically and culturally tumultuous period defined by the Vietnam War, and the recent impeachment crisis surrounding President Bill Clinton and his affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Throughout, Roth charts the fate of the idea of the individual in postwar America, dramatizing the impact that the contingencies of history and provisionalities of politics have had on the extraordinary lives of his three protagonists—Swede Levov (*American Pastoral*), Ira Ringold (*I Married a Communist*), and Coleman Silk (*The Human Stain*)—and thereby gauging the cultural, political, and literary vitality of that

most archetypal of American figures—the individual undertaking the quintessentially American task of inventing him-or herself.

The political and social realities of American life have always been in conflict with the mythic elements of American individualism, imposing limits, as politics inevitably does, on the freedom of the individual, and constraining the invention of the self within the circumscriptions of the social world.

Individualism, as an idea and as an ideology, lies at the heart of American liberal thought, which, if we are to believe influential consensus scholars such as Louis Hartz and Richard Hofstadter, places it at the center of American political tradition and culture.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, individualism as a political ideal is, in contemporary Anglo-American political theory, most often affiliated with liberalism, and particularly with those notions of individual autonomy, “laissez-faire” economics, distrust of the state, and opposition to all forms of collectivism, that constitute, in a general sense, the broad inclinations of liberal thinking and values. That is to say, particularly as the term has been bandied about in the continuing theoretical debate between liberals and communitarians, individualism, though saddled with a wide range of interpretations and meanings, has largely been remodeled as “liberal individualism,” the ideological association between the two traditions a well-entrenched, though certainly still contentious, part of contemporary mainstream political discussion.<sup>2</sup>

There are benefits to reading Roth’s trilogy with either of these two frameworks in mind. Calling attention to those aspects of his fiction that affirm

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<sup>1</sup> See particularly Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America*, and Richard Hofstadter’s *The American Political Tradition*.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of this theoretical development and its implications see Colin Bird’s *The Myth of Liberal Individualism*.



America's shared attachment to its traditional liberal democratic beliefs, whatever the particular antagonisms of specific political issues or cultural conflicts, as well as to those elements which put that consensus under scrutiny and critique the liberal commitment to basic ideals of equality and individual freedom, would give us a sense of how Roth's fiction negotiates the difficult territory of the American liberal tradition and its pertinence to postwar political and social dilemmas in America. While, attempting to determine the extent to which Roth's fiction indicates a certain sympathy with, or even determinate political commitment to, the ideological or philosophical underpinnings of liberal theory and its rather complicated relationship to individualism as a political ideal, would help demarcate the theoretical boundaries of Roth's fiction and focus our attention on how they might be said to participate in the ongoing discussion concerning the often conflicting demands of the principles of social justice and individual freedom amongst liberal thinkers in America. Roth's sympathies are undoubtedly liberal, and either approach would provide a ground on which to engage the political dynamics of Roth's narrative exploration of self-invention and American identity, and thus, to some extent, both are useful for our present purposes.

However, it is the way that the unraveling of history and politics has of pulling at the seams that bind the idea of a common America with the notion of American individualism, which seems most compelling to Roth in his trilogy. The depth of the political, social, and personal conflict—certainly as central to the American tradition as consensus—between the meaning of America embodied in its mythology, founding principles, and democratic promise, and the reality of the

experience of America as it continues to unfold, is the overarching subject of the trilogy. Roth's characters inherit, as part of the American legacy, not just a tradition of liberal consensus, and a belief in the potential of individual aspiration, but also the unresolved ambivalences, difficulties, and tensions, particularly those related to inequality, of American liberal democracy. The central protagonist in each of the novels of the trilogy interprets this American legacy in his own fashion, an act that puts each in conflict with the ascendant political, institutional, and cultural forces of his day. Conflict, between the individual determination to invent the self, and thus interpret the meaning of what it is to be American, and the inescapable historical encumbrances of family, race, ideology, and the various limitations of human nature, is what drives the fictional scenarios that Roth, through his narrator Nathan Zuckerman, offers as part of the larger story of the development of postwar American liberal democracy.

Alongside Roth's thematic concern with the impact of postwar political developments on the vitality of the fundamental dialogue concerning American individualism and identity, is a narrative undercurrent that runs throughout the trilogy, which registers the postwar desiccation of the left in America. By tracing the declension of postwar intellectual and political radicalism through the anti-communist hysteria of the cold war period, the "revolutionary" politics of the Vietnam era, and the onset of cultural politics exemplified by political correctness and the "culture wars," Roth charts the diminishing spirit of the progressive, reformist, and populist ambitions of the left in America. Roth's trilogy tracks the retreat of the American left in the face of the forces of history, marking, if not the end of progressive politics in America, at least the exhaustion of what Todd Gitlin

describes as, “that core belief shared by Americanism and by the historic ideals of the Left: a belief in progress through the unfolding of a humanity present—at least potentially—in every human being” (Gitlin 85). We will, as this chapter develops, come to describe the historical and political encroachment on “that core belief” in terms borrowed largely from the political theorist George Kateb and his notion of “democratic individualism.”

American political thinkers who have expressed a deep concern regarding the decline of liberalism in contemporary America, such as Robert Hughes, Russell Jacoby, and Todd Gitlin, have frequently reminded their readers that it has most often fallen to the left in America to provide the engine for progress and reform, largely through its willingness to imagine the possibility of an alternative future, its propensity to understand selves and society in a manner that challenges prevailing conventions and institutions.<sup>3</sup> They also make the point that reform politics in America has functioned most effectively when it expressed its commitment to change in terms consistent with the highest principles of America’s liberal democratic consensus, offering its vision of the future as an advancement of liberty or equality. As Russell Jacoby argues, “the vitality of liberalism rests on its left flank, which operates as its goad and critic. As the left surrenders a vision, liberalism loses its bearings; it turns flaccid and uncertain” (8). This political situation in America, a state of affairs in which, again to borrow Jacoby’s characterization, “radicals have lost their bite and liberals their backbone,” makes it difficult for either liberal individuality or democratic commonality to flourish, a point that Roth’s trilogy seems determined to dramatize (xii).

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<sup>3</sup> See particularly, Robert Hughes’ *Culture of Complaint*, Russell Jacoby’s *The End of Utopia*, and Todd Gitlin’s *The Twilight of Common Dreams*.

The “American trilogy” does not promote anything like a new vision of the future for America, nor does it propose a particular program for the resurgence or renewal of the American left. In that sense, Roth’s work is not political, it makes no real effort to argue, convince, or direct its readers towards a specific political objective. What it does assert is an individualist sensibility, an affirmation of the formidable resources of individuals in the face of those forces—historical, social, and political—that make claims on the individual potential for self-creation and seek to direct the aspirations of individuals towards particular identities, ideas, and community obligations. Roth sketches episodes of extraordinary individualism that amplify the ever present tension between self and society, creating opportunities to consider the manner in which the self, in America, is perennially ensnared in the conflict between the claims of self and social determination. The political manifestation of this antagonism, the struggle between the politics of individuality and the politics of community, when contained within the framework of the American liberal democratic consensus, often yields provisional settlements and compromises which lead to real progress, but, as Roth’s work highlights, it also too often yields periods of intense conflict, extraordinarily divisive politics, and, perhaps the central object of his satirical gaze, what Roth calls “the ecstasy of sanctimony” (Roth *The Human Stain* 2). Meditations on the fate of the American self during these periods, on the tragedy of individualism during times of what one character in *American Pastoral* refers to as “the real American crazy shit,” are what occupy Roth in the pages of his trilogy (Roth *American Pastoral* 277).

## Roth and the Party of Irony: Adamism and Individualism in *American Pastoral*

Presented with a novel entitled *American Pastoral*, containing chapter headings with names like “Paradise Remembered,” “The Fall,” and “Paradise Lost,” Roth compels his readers to revisit what R.W.B. Lewis called “the matter of Adam.” Lewis’s study, *The American Adam*, explores the notion of a mythic American identity concentrated around the emergence, in a variety of nineteenth century American literature, of a powerful image of the new world’s representative man as an innocent, liberated, totally individual figure. Lewis describes this figure as:

An individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. (Lewis 5)

As Lewis follows the disputations and developments surrounding this image of the “American as Adam” through the writings of, amongst others, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Henry James, he argues for an approach to American culture and identity as a debate, or at best a dialogue, amongst historians, essayists, critics, philosophers, as well as novelists and poets, which, during the second quarter of the nineteenth century according to Lewis, was dominated by a contentious effort to define the American character with reference to themes such as: “innocence, novelty, experience, sin, time, evil, hope, the present, memory, the past, [and] tradition” (2).

Critics of Lewis have argued that *The American Adam* fails to adequately engage with the central political concerns of the historical period in question,

ignoring issues such as slavery and economic uncertainty in favor of a purely textual approach. In the words of Russel Reising, "For all the political implications of his terminology, Lewis distances his themes and the writers he studies from engagement with issues beyond their private thematics in so far as they relate to "the matter of Adam" (116). In defense of Lewis, John Whalen-Bridge points out that, the epilogue to Lewis's book, entitled "Adam in the Age of Containment," "is an explicit consideration of the relationship between American literary mythology and political culture," arguing that while Lewis's seminal work has fostered some ahistorical tendencies within postwar American literary criticism, "there is also a political strain within [the] Adamic tradition" (Whalen-Bridge 107). Lewis's *The American Adam* may not suggest a specific political context for the cultural dialogue it examines, nor does it critique negative or renunciatory attitudes towards social engagement within the literature that is its focus, however, Lewis's study does assert a conviction about the Adamic myth as a vital resource within American culture, as a "symbol of a possible individual condition," which writers return to in difficult times to create characters which "proffer their private dignity and their very amount of being as worthy to compare with the dignity and being of the public world" (Lewis 129).

Lewis's Adamic figure constitutes an historic and mythic dream, an ideal vision of life that stands against the forces of history, but certainly not outside of them. The new Adam may no longer be, if it ever was, a politically persuasive idea, however this certainly does not mean that it is an apolitical or politically unimportant one. Leo Marx makes this point, more or less, when, in *The Machine and the Garden*, he calls attention to contemporary liberal historians such as

Richard Hofstadter and Marvin Meyers, whose work, he argues, demonstrates the “impediment to clarity of thought and, from their point of view, to social progress,” that results when pastoral or Edenic myths are employed in the service of political ideology (7). This is, of course, recognizable as the general argument against pastoralism, the notion that when the pastoral sensibility appears attached to a political vision, one is firmly in the territory of reactionary ideology, false consciousness, and the “romantic perversion of thought and feeling” (Marx *Garden* 10).

Pastoralism, as the argument goes, is fed by nostalgia, and thus, inevitably taints politics with escapism, sentimentality, and an irrational resistance to change and progress. It panders to the emotional need to venerate the past, to escape from the difficulties and complexities of the present by evoking a time when the world was a simpler and safer place. The image of the American Adam, the mythic notion of the innocent individual poised at the beginning of a new history, provides the pastoral vision with its perfect inhabitant, just as it provides the conservative ideologue with the perfect citizen for his idealized version of the American past<sup>4</sup>. As Lewis himself observes “the dangers, both to life and to letters, of the Adamic ideal were acknowledged at once and have been repeated endlessly” (9). However, for Lewis, this tells only part of the story.

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<sup>4</sup> Leo Marx points out that the “discerning, politically liberal historians of American thought,” that he uses as examples of critics of the presence of this kind of idealization of the American past in political discourse rarely invoke the word “pastoral.” Instead, as he lists them, “they refer to the hold of “‘rural values’ upon the national consciousness ([Richard] Hofstadter), or to the ‘agrarian myth’ (Hofstadter), or to the ‘Old Republican idyll’ ([Marvin] Myers), or to the ‘myth of the garden’ ([Henry Nash] Smith))” (Marx, *Machine* 7). However they refer to them, according to Marx, they all agree that the tendency to mythologize the past, in the service of political ideology, “[helps] to mask the real problems of an industrial civilization” (7).



The Adamic vision, argues Lewis, also lends American culture and politics an “original sense of tragedy,” in its relation to tradition, an approach to history that includes a sense of loss as a vital component of its understanding of the relationship between the experience of the past and the circumstances of the present. It is a vision that has consistently provided “occasions for reflection and invention,” a chance to consider the moral significance and pragmatic impact of developments in culture, politics, and society, as well as to affirm the possibility of new developments and ideas for the future. For Lewis, the dream of the Adamic individual functions less as an aspiration than as an inspiration within American culture, a figure which always has the potential to “pose anew, in the classic way of illumination as it did in the American nineteenth century, the picture of what might be against the knowledge of what is” (10).

Adamism contains within it an expression of enduring democratic cheerfulness, a willingness to return, again and again, to a vision of innocence and freedom both in recognition of, and in response to, the often-tragic circumstances that engulf such innocence. Lewis refers to those with this sensibility, which he also characterizes as “tragic optimism,” as belonging to “the party of Irony,” a group which “consisted of those men who wanted both to undermine and to bolster the image of the American as a new Adam” (193). Undermine, Lewis explains, in order to reassert the importance of tradition and community to the life of the individual, and bolster in order to cultivate a sense of the vastness of individual possibility. Lewis may emphasize the creative stimulus to writers that the tensions between these two imperatives provide, however, he also clearly exhibits some sensitivity to the moral and political implications of his subject.

Lewis's purview obviously extends beyond the purely aesthetic when he sees fit to criticize the "hopelessness" and "chilling skepticism" of cold war America, a period which he characterizes as "the age of containment." There is, he argues, something of a mordant skepticism coloring the contemporary picture of America, an agonizing disillusionment pervading much of literature, and what he calls "public conduct," that seems embarrassed by the innocence and simple self-reliance that the Adamic figure represents. The image of the American Adam, for Lewis, is perhaps best understood as a kind of test, useful for sounding the depths of that sense of hopefulness and possibility that has always been an important element of American democracy, a metaphor which consistently provides the American writer with "a sensitive instrument" by which to gauge "the moral weather of the life he [or she] was imitating" (153). What does the innocent and self-directed individual experience when he enters the actual world, openly facing the various dangers and demands of history and society? This question, which lies at the heart of American Adamic mythology, will always have political implications, particularly for those who view individualism as the vital center of the American story.

Roth's novel, *American Pastoral*, self-consciously locates itself within that strain of the American literary tradition which Lewis associates with Adamism, presenting us with a hero, Seymour "Swede" Levov, that both embraces and expresses the American promise of self-creation, a figure preoccupied with the Adamic business of "forming yourself as an ideal person [...] who frees himself of the pre-America insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions so as to live unapologetically as an equal among equals" (Roth *American Pastoral* 85). Roth's

Adamic narrative, his story “of the Swede’s great fall,” also makes clear the unavoidably political nature of American identity, focusing on the tumultuous historical events of the sixties and its impact on the direction and nature of the “debate,” cultural and political, concerning the meaning of the American character, and the possibilities offered by the American experience (88). Roth’s novel marks the extent of the changes in the American attitude towards idealism and nationalism since the end of WW II, raising important questions regarding what has been gained and what has been lost, and the implications for the individual and for American individualism when the seams of an American identity, and the idea of a common America, seem to give way.

Roth offers an indication of the scope of his project in what the novel’s narrator Nathan Zuckerman characterizes as “the speech I didn’t give at my forty-fifth high school reunion, a speech to myself masked as a speech to them” (44). This speech, which Zuckerman began to compose after he had attended his reunion, functions as a kind of internal monologue, an extended rumination in which Zuckerman attempts to make sense of a night of “hugging, kissing, kibitzing, laughing, hovering over” his childhood classmates who graduated with him from Weequahic High, New Jersey, forty-five years previous. (45). Zuckerman emerges from his reunion with a seemingly urgent need “to comprehend the union underlying the reunion,” to express the sense of a common experience that united his childhood community, a common experience that Zuckerman wants to argue, can, in some respects, be said to have been shared by a whole generation of Americans (44).

For Zuckerman, this common experience is strongly associated with the end of World War II, and the general feeling he discerned amongst Americans that their nation stood poised at a new beginning. There was, as Zuckerman puts it, a more-or-less common sense after the war that, with “the clock of history reset and a whole people’s aims limited no longer by the past,” the sins and burdens of history had, in some sense, been redeemed by victory in the war, inspiring the growing determination within individuals and communities of all kinds to seize the opportunity, promised by the postwar period, for “Americans [...] to start over again, en masse, everyone in it together” (40-41). Anxiety, hardship, racism, inequality, and mistrust still formed a pervasive and persistent undercurrent of the American experience, but it was now countered by a strong belief in a better future. As Zuckerman recalls, “there was a big belief in life” illuminating his predominantly Jewish neighborhood. Weequahic, New Jersey, like much of the rest of the country, was caught up in the energy and sense of promise that followed the end of the war, an optimism, as we are told, that inspired a community, and indeed a whole nation, to believe in a better future for themselves and their families. As Zuckerman, summing up the industrious and hopeful spirit of the period, succinctly puts it, “a better existence was going to be ours. The goal was to *have* goals, the aim to *have* aims” (41).

It was not this ebullience, however, that gave birth to the mythic figure of “Swede” Levov, star athlete and all-American kid. Indeed, as Zuckerman explains, the idolization of “the Swede” answered the yearnings of a much darker and more solemn time, providing succor for a community in desperate need of a distraction from the uncertainty and horror associated with World War II.

The elevation of Swede Levov into the household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews can best be explained, I think, by the war against the Germans and the Japanese and the fears that it fostered. With the Swede indomitable on the playing field, the meaningless surface of life provided a bizarre, delusionary kind of sustenance, the happy release into a Swedean innocence, for those who lived in dread of never seeing their sons or their brothers or their husbands again.  
(4)

For those in his neighborhood, Swede Levov represented an “unconscious oneness with America,” an epitome of achievement, confidence, and style that seemed effortlessly to transcend the contradictions and anxieties of the American Jewish experience. “The contradiction in Jews who want to fit in and want to stand out, who insist they are different and insist they are no different, resolved itself in the triumphant spectacle of this Swede,” a spectacle in which patriotism, communal aspiration, and heroic individuality seemed to converge (20).

The Swede was a living symbol, a neighborhood figure whose exploits transcended the confines of ethnic identity and neighborhood expectation, representing for the inhabitants of Weequahic, a broadening sense of individual possibility in America, as well as a broader notion of their own identity. The simple, natural, guileless style of the Swede, typified according to Zuckerman by “the Jewishness that he wore so lightly,” communicated a distinctively American way of being, that of the genuine democratic individual (20). The Swede’s athletic talent and glorious achievements provided a much needed distraction from the horrors of war, however, embodied in the way he achieved them was “something grander even than his talent for sports”, what Zuckerman describes as “the talent for ‘being himself,’ the capacity to be this strange engulfing force and yet to have a voice and a smile unsullied by even a flicker of superiority” (19).

For the Swede, the ordinary rules of being Jewish in America did not seem to apply, the combination of his extraordinary physical prowess and his “unsurpassable style,” personified the powerful American theme of the liberation of the individual from the inhibitions of social constraint and the limits of stifling social convention. Manifest “in the marvelous body of the Swede” was the promise and meaning of American democracy, a display of extraordinary innocence, strength, and freedom which the inhabitants of Weequahic “embraced as a symbol of hope” during the difficult and fearful reality of the war years (20; 5). In the words of critic Andrew Furman, “the assimilationist immigrant dreams of Newark’s Jews culminate in the heroic figure of the Swede. His distinctively American brand of *sprezzatura* goes a long way toward convincing Zuckerman and his cohorts that they just might transcend the status of “jittering little Jews of the Diaspora,” as Shuki Elchanan predicts in *The Counterlife*” (Furman 36).

The Swede’s presence as the embodiment of American individuality, his mythic figuration as the Adamic individual and symbolic manifestation of the collective American dream, is interwoven into Zuckerman’s understanding of his childhood, an integral part of both his own formative experiences, and the formative experience of his community, generation, and nation as he understands them. The hope and promise that the Swede represented to Zuckerman’s neighborhood during World War II was, to some extent, affirmed and internalized during the remarkable energy of the postwar years, at least in Zuckerman’s recollection. There was, for Zuckerman, something powerful that united him and his classmates,

[a]nd united us not merely in where we came from but in where we were going and how we would get there. We had new means and new ends, new allegiances and new aims, new innards—a new *ease*, somewhat less agitation in facing down the exclusions the goyim still wished to preserve. (44)

The promise of freedom and opportunity that appeared to so easily attach itself to the figure of Swede Levov seemed, for Zuckerman, for a particular historical moment in postwar America, to have been realized, trumping the uncertainties and hesitations which were so much a part of the worldview of the generation, particularly of those who had lived through the Depression, preceding Zuckerman's own. For Zuckerman, the Swede was the "boy we were all going to follow into America, our point man into the next immersion" (89). He embodied, not the realization of the American dream, but its vividness, its commonness, its democratic promise. To again borrow Andrew Furman's terms, Levov's example convinces Zuckerman "that the idyllic American pastoral life is no longer off limits to the Jew in America" (Furman 36).

However Zuckerman, Roth's fictional narrator, tell us that he decides to write about the Swede, not to celebrate the mythic qualities of his heroic achievements or affirm the simple allegorical meaning of his life, but rather as a way to approach the sheer inescapability and contingency of history. Some critics have suggested that Zuckerman's fictionalized account of the Swede's life is an attempt "to recover [...] the true subjectivity of Levov," to get beyond the simple surface of his childhood hero to "discover a substratum" of subjectivity which would serve to demystify, not only the mythic narrative of the Swede, but the mythic notion of an ideal American self (Millard 24, Roth *Pastoral* 38). Indeed Zuckerman conceives of his narrative as "a realistic chronicle" concerned with



portraying Swede Levov's life "not [...] as a god or demigod in whose triumphs one could exult as a boy but his life as another assailable man" (89). It is not Swede Levov the hero that Zuckerman puts up on his stage, but rather it is Swede Levov the tragic figure, the victim of history, the fallen idol whose story he tells; for Zuckerman the tale of Swede Levov typifies "the tragedy of the man not set up for tragedy—that is every man's tragedy" (86).

Zuckerman turns to the myth of the American Adam, to the figure of the innocent hero suffering the tragic consequences of a collision with history, as the narrative framework for his story of the Swede, not because it provides insight into some deeper recesses of the Swede's subjectivity, but rather because it effectively dramatizes the radical disruption in the sense of American identity and common aspiration that the turbulent period of the 1960s visited on America. Zuckerman begins to conceive of the scope and structure of his tale while dancing at his reunion:

So then... I am out there on the floor with Joy, and I am thinking of the Swede and of what happened to his country in a mere twenty-five years, between the triumphant days at wartime Weequahic High and the explosion of his daughter's bomb in 1968, of that mysterious, troubling, extraordinary historical transition. I am thinking of the sixties and of the disorder occasioned by the Vietnam War. [...] I am thinking of the Swede's great fall. (88)

The Swede's tragedy in many ways mirrors the American tragedy that was Vietnam, his desperation and suffering reflecting the violence done to the consciousness of the whole nation. Many writers have called attention to this notion of Vietnam as a wedge driven into the psyche of America, unraveling the idea of a common identity, and exposing the vulnerability and illusory nature of those ideals that provided the binding agent for the American dream. Vietnam let

loose what Roth refers to as “the indigenous American berserk,” an era of social and political division, violence, and fragmentation, a period that political theorist Francis Fukuyama refers to as “The Great Disruption,” that stormed away at the conception of America as a melting pot, as the land of opportunity and democracy, full of immigrants aspiring to be middle-class individualists.

Zuckerman’s image of an ideal American identity, embodied in the figure of the Swede, was forged in the unifying days of the war effort. Echoing the image of integration and common purpose proffered by Hollywood and the obligatory multiethnic and socially diverse platoons of its World War II movies, Zuckerman imaginatively reconstructs the Swede’s days as a marine, providing a detailed account, in first person, of the quintessentially American quality of the eighteen year old Swede’s coming of age, of his experience amongst the “Irish guys, Italian guys, Slovaks, Poles, tough little bastards from Pennsylvania, kids who’d run away from fathers who worked in the mines and beat them with buckles and with fists,” that he “lived with and ate with and slept alongside” (212). This, for the Swede, illustrated the larger meaning of America, a nation certainly not free from prejudice and discrimination—“Nobody gave us any Jew boy shit. A little back in boot camp, but that was it”—but one with an impulse towards the fusing of diversity with common aspiration (213).

The Swede’s Americanism, his embodiment of and identification with the American ideal, connects him, in Zuckerman’s imagination, to other American mythic figures such as the hero from John R. Tunis’s *The Kid from Tomkinsville*, the archetypal American pioneer Johnny Appleseed, and perhaps most significantly, the slain Arthurian figure of President John F. Kennedy (7, 420, 83).

As Kenneth Millard points out, these are examples of “a number of myths *American Pastoral* employs to characterize an ideal of American selfhood and nationhood,” an ideal that provides an indispensable context for the Swede’s understanding of himself and his life (245).

Why, he lived in America the way he lived in his own skin. All the pleasures of his younger years were American pleasures, all that success and happiness had been American [...]. The loneliness he would feel as a man without all his American feelings. The longing he would feel if he had to live in another country. Yes, everything that gave meaning to his accomplishments had been American. Everything he loved was here. (Roth *Pastoral* 213)

Some critics point to this intertwining of the Swede’s sense of himself with the ideals of America, his identification with the mythic narratives of the American pastoral, as an indication of a lack of individuality, a subjectivity wholly constructed by national dreams and illusions. As Millard argues, “Levov’s conflation with myth is so complete that a sense of his individuality is erased;” it is a viewpoint that Zuckerman himself overtly considers in the novel (24).

Meeting with the Swede over dinner, Zuckerman ponders the possibility that the apparently simple nature of the Swede’s subjectivity, his seeming lack of artifice, ambivalence, and irrationality, was the truth of the man, that his interest in the Swede was a misplaced attempt to impose a depth of meaning onto his childhood idol that had no basis in reality.

Why bestow on him all this thinking? Why the appetite to know this guy? [...] Why clutch at him? What’s the matter with you? There’s nothing here but what you’re looking at. He’s all about being looked at. He always was. He is not faking all this virginity. You’re craving depths that don’t exist. This guy is the embodiment of nothing. (Roth *Pastoral* 39)

Of course, Zuckerman's attempt to tell the story of the Swede is the direct result of his realization that such thinking is spectacularly wrong, that the significance of the Swede's individuality, his subjectivity, is its ideal Americanness, the example it offers of an individual who believes himself fashioned of democratic values, liberal freedom, and American opportunity. Significantly, the Swede looks for the evidence of the flourishing of these ideals, not within the American state, American culture, American history, or American society, but within the American individual, within himself.

What, for Zuckerman, the Swede finally embodies is not the American dream, the myth of America as the Promised Land, or even the yearning for the American pastoral, but rather that which all of those narratives seek to express: the human aspiration towards self-realization, the desire for a time and place to act as an individual, to register one's individual uniqueness and potential. The Swede embodies the notion that the liberal ideals of America—democracy, tolerance, liberty, and respect for the dignity of the individual—can cultivate an awareness of the vastness of individual possibility, what political theorist George Kateb calls “a sense of one's inner ocean,” that can awaken a new sense of life in every individual. He represents that element of the American dialogue, epitomized by the work of figures such as Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau, that elicits profound hope and meaning from American individualism's claim to newness and innocence. To borrow one of Emerson's pairs of terms that R.W.B. Lewis also

adopts to help identify the many voices involved in the American dialogue, the Swede is recognizable as being firmly in the camp of the “party of Hope.”<sup>5</sup>

What is at stake in the narrative of the Swede is whether or not, in the face of the crisis over the Vietnam war, the failure of the vocabulary with which he imagines himself—“liberal,” “middle-class,” “tolerant,” “decency,” “unashamed,” “producer,”—renders his conception of an American identity, centered around democratic individualism, a bogus ideal. His daughter’s bombing of a local general store, as the Swede recognizes, is an act, not just of radical protest against the Vietnam War, but also of radical rejection—rejection of American ideals, of American identity, and, perhaps most incomprehensibly for the Swede, of her American father.

For her, being an American was loathing America, but loving America was something he could not let go of [...]. How could she ‘hate’ this country when she had no *conception* of this country? How could a child of his be so blind as to revile the ‘rotten system’ that had given her own family every opportunity to succeed? [...] There wasn’t much difference, *and she knew it*, between hating America and hating them. He loved the America she hated and blamed for everything that was imperfect in life and wanted violently to overturn, he loved the ‘bourgeois values’ she hated and ridiculed and wanted to subvert. (213)

For the Swede’s daughter, and for the more radical and militant elements of the New Left and antiwar movements of the sixties, there was no redemption or reawakening from history available to the individual. America was diseased by its racist and imperialist past, the origins of the American dream were tainted by

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<sup>5</sup> According to Lewis, “Historians after Emerson have either gone along with his dichotomies and have talked about the “dualism” of American culture; or they have selected one of Emerson’s two parties as constituting *the* American tradition, rejecting the other as a bleak foreign hangover or as immature native foolishness. But if we attend to the realities of American intellectual history, we must distinguish in it at least *three* voices (sometimes more). American culture has traditionally consisted of the productive and lively interplay of all three (7).”

slavery, expansionism, and inequality, and the Vietnam War was yet another manifestation of the curse of this original sin. The hopeful liberalism that the Swede so effortlessly embraces, the prospect of achieving a better life through hard work and individual aspiration which he claims as his right as an American, provides no bulwark against Merry's anti-Americanism, against Merry's angry and passionate alienation from her father's nation and all that it represents to him.

Anthony Hutchison sees Roth's characterization of the New Left's "anti-Americanism" as "a by-product of the author's attempt to retrieve the idea of a collectivist majoritarian liberalism that the political radicalism of the 1960's rejected" (31). Roth, it seems, carries the standard of the communitarian cause. Indeed, there is a suggestion in *American Pastoral*, that perhaps the New Left's demands for a seemingly unlimited right of personal freedom, its complete rejection of the middle-class way of life—of its values, sense of decorum, and belief in the idea of America—lurched too far beyond any reasonable definition of the American liberal consensus not to have had a detrimental impact on reform politics in America. The Swede's father, self-described "lifetime Democrat" and New Deal liberal, expresses the sense of threat to the middle-class that accompanied the inflamed political and social atmosphere of the period, decrying, in a manner now commonly associated with conservatives and communitarians, the growing sense of social disorder and moral decline in America since the end of the war.

We grew up in an era when it was a different place, when the feeling for community, home, family, parents, work ... well, it was different. The changes are beyond conception. I sometimes think that more has changed since 1945 than in all the years of history there have ever been. I don't know what to make of the end of so

many things. The lack of feeling for individuals that a person sees in that movie<sup>6</sup>. The lack of feeling for places like what is going on in Newark<sup>7</sup>—how does this happen? You don't have to revere your family, you don't have to revere your country, you don't have to revere where you live, but you have to know you *have* them, you have to know that you are *part* of them. (Roth *Pastoral* 364-365)

What Mr. Levov laments is not so much a lost American idealism, or the rejection of a communitarian politics, but rather the loss of respect for any limits, the elevation of transgression as the basis for progressive politics and culture, giving rise to a doctrine of individualism that seems to have absolutely no regard for the values which define his way of life, for his sense of decency, responsibility, patriotism, and respect for hard work. It is incomprehensible to him that those values, which so often in the past have provided the platform from which to critique and challenge the reigning authorities and institutions of power in America, have become objects of such contempt and revulsion, especially on the part of the new “revolutionary” left.

If Roth can be said to be attempting to recover anything it is that element of civility, responsibility, and belief in a common purpose that once furnished middle-class culture in America with its moral realism, its understanding of the indispensability of foundations, respect for community, and self-discipline, to the flourishing of individualism. “What is the limit?” is Lou Levov’s response to the politics of the New Left, to its equation of liberation with the complete rejection of authority and unhindered celebration of transgression (364). It is a response that does not challenge the centrality of individualism to American liberalism in order to rediscover a majoritarian or communitarian conception of the American liberal

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<sup>6</sup> Mr. Levov is engaged in a dinner party discussion of the pornographic film *Deepthroat*.

<sup>7</sup> Largely a reference to the exodus of business and people following the 1967 Newark race riots.



tradition, rather it objects to a doctrine of individualism that defines itself as merely freedom of choice or radical personal liberation. For political theorists such as Christopher Lasch, historians like John Patrick Diggins, and contemporary Emersonian thinkers like George Kateb and Stanley Cavell, such a conception of individualism stands in opposition to a more robust tradition of American liberalism on the grounds that it produces an impoverished, atomistic, and deracinated understanding of the American self, a self mired in cynicism and disillusionment and severed from those liberal principles—like a sense of vocation, an understanding of the value of work, and a respect for individual integrity—that seek to further its aspirations and affirm its dignity. What Lou Levov finds impossible to understand about the individualism of the New Left and sixties counterculture is just how it expects to achieve a virtuous nation, or community, or set of political institutions, without a virtuous individualism.

That Lou Levov's appeal for decency, concern for individual dignity, and respect for family sounds like conservatism now, only emphasizes the extent of the success of the New Left's attack on consensus liberalism. For Roth, the polarizing effect of New Left radicalism on those coalitions which embraced the need for social reform, seems to have isolated liberalism from what is most valuable about the middle-class sensibility and its potential contribution to progressive politics—namely its commitment to the idea of a common America. Central to Lou Levov's middle-class liberal sensibility, for Roth, is its understanding that individualism, as an ideal, must be encouraged and cultivated, but in practice should always be subject to those limitations and compromises which experience, conscience, and a sense of responsibility necessitate. Lou Levov's mini-jeremiad, like all jeremiads,

tells a story of decline, demarcating a more virtuous past from a less virtuous present. In many ways it signals a major transition in the story of the middle-class in America, a story that once told of its faith in liberal progress, of a conception of the march toward a common American destiny fueled by a shared aspiration for greater freedom, more democracy, and expanding rights. Zuckerman speaks of “the anticipated American future that was simply to have unrolled out of the solid American past, out of each generation getting smarter [...] out of each new generation’s breaking away from the parochialism a little further, out of the desire to go the limit in America with your rights” (85). This is the story that the more radical elements of the New Left rejected, finding precious little progress or promise in the middle-class faith in a common America and its central ideal of liberal individualism. Confronted with a reformist left driven by the condemnation and rejection of their values and ideals, the middle-class, like Lou Levov, is left to look to the past rather than the future, and ultimately, increasingly to the emerging voices of conservatism rather than the progressive left, for any recognition of its vision of the American pastoral.<sup>8</sup>

There is, in *American Pastoral*, an effort on Roth’s part to reestablish contact with the vision of America offered by middle-class reform liberalism before, as Todd Gitlin puts it, “the idea of a common America, if there was to be one at all, was ceded, by default, to the Right” (73). However, this is done, not in

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Delblanco expresses this line of thought quite elegantly when he writes that, “discrete stories of particular groups within American society tend no longer to be regarded as tributaries that come together in a collective national history of expanding rights. As the cultural critic Bill Readings wrote, we “no longer tell a story of liberation as the passage from the margins to the center.” It is impossible to date the death of this story with any precision; but if we look somewhere around the moment when the reformist dream that Lyndon Johnson called the Great Society became a casualty of the Vietnam war, we will not, I think, be too far off the mark” (Delblanco 94).

the name of some communitarian or collectivist doctrine, but rather as one method of gauging the extent of what has been lost of that sense of possibility, appeal to newness, and liberal democratic faith that once inspired and energized liberal politics in America. Zuckerman's identification of the Swede with President John F. Kennedy is itself an invocation of a more hopeful and inspiring public life which, for Roth, appears lost to present day American politics, a reminder that the story of contemporary American liberalism fits very neatly into the tragic pattern of a vigorous idealism that could not survive the trials of a harsh reality<sup>9</sup>.

The gulf which the sixties and Vietnam opened up between the political left and those Americans who are interested in social reform but aspire towards a middle-class life or hold middle-class values, has left liberalism in America in crisis, seemingly no longer able to inspire a vision of the future liable to bridge that gap. The Swede's particular pastoral imagination is rooted in an image of America as a place where the possibilities of the individual can be developed and explored because of a common commitment to creating those social and political conditions that encourage the flourishing of the self, a place where individual self-realization is necessarily interwoven with the embracing of American democratic ideals. When confronted with its antithesis, an image of America as a place where individualism is distorted and manipulated rather than encouraged by "the American way of life," and where liberal values constitute the greatest hindrance to democratic reform rather than its most compelling motive, the Swede's innocent

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<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note how often historians utilize the terms and tropes of tragedy to describe the period of American history spanning the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. A very good recent example is M.J. Heale's *The Sixties in America: History, Politics, and Protest*, in which he entitles one of his chapters concerning this period "The United States in the World: From Hubris to Humiliation," and writes that "the attempt of the Kennedy administration to revitalize the American sense of mission now seemed to have been tempting fate" (69). This is a period that consistently seems to engage the literary sensibilities of its commentators.

affirmation of American idealism appears, not only naïve and unconvincing, but at least partly culpable for the intensity of “the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral” reaction of the sixties (Roth *Pastoral* 86).

The issue which lies at the heart of *American Pastoral* is not the illusory nature of the Swede’s innocence for, as R.W.B. Lewis tells us, Adamic figures in America are always and inevitably undone by their experience, but rather what role, if any at all, does the Swede’s innocence play in his own tragedy. Is the Swede’s affirmation of the redemptive myth of America as a place to express himself as an individual, free from the encumbrances of history and undefiled by the sins of the past, in the face of the suffering, oppression, and injustice that drives his own daughter to murder as an act of political protest, an indefensible transgression in itself? His daughter, and the radical anti-American movement whose worldview she embraces, condemns the Swede’s ideal of American individualism as little more than indifference posing as innocence, and thus morally culpable in a world fraught with such oppression and injustice. Considering America’s history of slavery and racism, the many atrocities of the twentieth-century, and the tragic circumstances of the Vietnam war, any claim of innocence is, from such a perspective, not only indefensible, but evidence of a decadent ideology which is tantamount to complicity. While the Swede’s brother Jerry, a successful and much divorced doctor, contends that such claims of innocence are nothing more than a self-serving illusion, an unsustainable American fantasy that inevitably comes with a price—“And you thought all that façade was going to come without cost,” Jerry upbraids the Swede, “Genteel and innocent. *But that costs, too, Seymour*” (280).

Roth is certainly uncompromising in his dramatization of the tragedy of innocence in America, the ultimate and inevitable betrayal of the Swede's idealism by the "American berserk." However, just as dramatic as the Swede's lost innocence is the sense Roth communicates in the novel of Zuckerman's need to come to grips with the Swede's tragedy, his struggle to provide some narrative or mythic framework with which to tell his hero's story. As the Adamic figure within the mythic structure of Zuckerman's narrative, we expect the Swede not to be prepared for his coming fall from grace; however, it is the extent to which Zuckerman seems to share in that unpreparedness that closes the distance between what the Swede embodies, his mythic figuration, and the role he plays in Zuckerman's consciousness. Zuckerman tells us that despite a lifetime's experience that has taught him that "no one gets through unmarked by brooding, grief, confusion, and loss," he "was still convinced that for the Swede it had to have been pain-free all the way" (20). In fact, we are told, one of the most significant reasons, aside from his lingering adolescent hero-worship, that Zuckerman decides to answer the Swede's initial request for a meeting is his inability to imagine what could have "ever threatened to destabilize the Swede's trajectory" (20).

If the Swede's innocence makes him complicit in his own tragedy, then Zuckerman's innocence, his unpreparedness for the news of the Swede's fall, is undoubtedly implicated as well. In fact to Zuckerman, as both a writer and as a man, it is the recognition of the dramatic impact of this circumstance that is the most compelling element of the Swede's story.

He'd invoked in me, when I was a boy—as he did in hundreds of other boys—the strongest fantasy I had of being someone else. But to wish oneself into another's glory, as boy or as man, is an impossibility, untenable on psychological grounds if you are not a writer, and on aesthetic grounds if you are. To embrace your hero in his destruction, however—to let your hero's life occur within you when everything is trying to diminish him, to imagine yourself into his bad luck, to implicate yourself not in his mindless ascendancy, when he is the fixed point of your adulation, but in the bewilderment of his tragic fall—well, that's worth thinking about. (88)

Zuckerman celebrates the aesthetic and mythic meaning of the Swede's fall as a kind of self-chastisement, a cautionary tale warning of the consequences of retaining innocent attitudes in a corrupted and corrupting world, of the childishness of “assuming that because he was once upon a time this mythic character the Swede he had no limits” (72). Giving the Swede's story a tragic structure, telling it as an Adamic narrative, dramatizes the notion of individual limits by reaffirming the “utterly ordinary humanness” of an extraordinary individual, exposing once again the vulnerability and provisionality of the promise of freedom born of innocence.

However, if via Zuckerman, Roth affirms the ordinariness of the Swede's tragic fall, he also affirms the extraordinary value of the qualities and attributes that make his fall inevitable. The Swede's American pastoral, his personal identification with the ideals of American democracy and individualism, evokes that innocent aspect of American culture and imagination that, as Lewis describes it in *The American Adam*, is ultimately as illusory as it is valuable. The literary value of innocence is well evidenced by the sense of tragedy with which Roth imbues the Swede's story. Ironically, this capacity for innocence, an innocence which, in the American literary tradition, inherently contains the basis of tragedy,

functions as a resource of hope for American democratic culture, a tradition that constantly needs to imagine sources of individual inspiration, cheerfulness, and a sense of possibility for the future, especially during times when such encouragements are scarce in American public and political life. In terms of politics, it makes possible a doctrine of individualism that binds the realization of individual liberty to the ideals and aspirations of the American democratic tradition, providing occasions and opportunities to express the conviction that individuality can be a source of connectedness, that in America, to use the words of George Kateb, “individuality’s meaning is not fully disclosed until it is indissociably connected to democracy” (Kateb *Inner Ocean* 78). This imaginative resource, the capacity to reaffirm the proposition that individuals might, in good faith, embrace the ideals of America innocently, in full knowledge that inevitably the experience of America will defeat, and sometimes even destroy that innocence, is essential to what Kateb calls “the doctrine of democratic individuality.”

Roth’s revisiting of the myth of the American Adam, in *American Pastoral*, is very much in the spirit of what R.W.B Lewis described as “the party of Irony.” His expression of sympathy for the Swede, for his optimism, his innocence, and his idealism is matched only by the vividness with which he dramatizes his assailability, the frailty of those qualities with which the hopeful individual confronts the contingencies and disruptions of history. The collision, in *American Pastoral*, of Roth’s sympathy for innocence and his recognition of experience, embodied in the figure of the Swede, underscores Roth’s awareness of the vital role played in American culture and political thought, of what Lewis calls “a tragic optimism,” or what Kateb refers to as “a more experienced innocence.”



It is a temperament capable of affirming the promise of the future, while retaining a keen consciousness of the burdens of the past, of bringing a sense of irony and moderation to the dialogue of American identity that too often seems polarized between the party of Hope and the party of Memory. Roth's novel attempts to respond to the diminishment of this third voice in the American dialogue which, in recent times, has struggled to eloquently articulate a perspective willing to affirm the possibility of individual freedom while also acknowledging the inevitable limitations imposed by the demands of community, or to cultivate a sense of a common future as a way, not to absolve, but rather to overcome, the inequalities and injustices of the past.

Roth's novel highlights the abatement of a liberal temperament towards consensus, the difficult but vital work of searching for common dreams and aspirations on which to build a nation, as a central feature of the American left, and more generally from the sense of American identity, since the "great disruption" of the sixties. Certainly the kind of postwar idealism and patriotic spirit which shaped the individual and communal aspirations of the Swede, as Zuckerman makes clear, lost its innocence in the sixties, particularly as the New Left helped to reveal, along with the civil rights and feminist movements, the extent and depth of America's problems concerning inequality and race. However, to close off the ongoing dialogue concerning the envisioning of the American future from the hopeful potential of American idealism and the unifying potential of American nationalism, to simply dismiss the Swede's American pastoral as an innocent dream or an unrealizable utopian vision, stifles the possible contribution of both the liberal aspiration for greater individual freedom, as well as

the democratic aspiration for greater social unity, to that dialogue. Roth's attempt to articulate the value of American idealism through revisiting the tragic moments of its diminishment and rejection in postwar America dramatizes a liberal sensibility that seems increasingly marginal to the political and cultural discourse of contemporary America.

**"All the brutish American stuff": McCarthy and the Betrayal of Lincolnian Individualism in *I Married a Communist***

"Our age yields no great and perfect persons. We want men and women who shall renovate life and our social state, but we see that most natures are insolvent, cannot satisfy their own wants, have an ambition out of all proportion to their practical force and do lean and beg day and night continually."

--Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

If there is an historical figure that represents that idealistic strand of American liberal democracy that promotes both individual self-construction and democratic equality it is Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln's conviction that the political ideals of individual liberty and egalitarianism as set down in the Declaration of Independence should and could direct and shape American life as the political and moral foundations of the nation, offers a vision of American exceptionalism that takes seriously both the tragedy of the historical failure to achieve and live up to those ideals, and the possibility of redemption to be found in working and aspiring towards creating the conditions in which they might be realized. The appeal of Lincoln for liberals lies not just in his advocacy of the intimate association between individual self-determination and the principle of equality that was a central element of his politics and rhetoric, but in the example of his life—"Abraham Lincoln," as Daniel Walker Howe succinctly puts it, "preached what he

practiced” (141). This “deeply felt dedication to the intellectual and moral growth of the individual, and to the development of a political order that would support such growth,” reserves for Lincoln, in the mind of many historians of American liberalism, a role in American history unlike any other. For those who see Lincoln as both the embodiment and the spokesman of the political and moral foundation of American liberalism, Lincoln assumes the role of teacher. “In Abraham Lincoln,” John Patrick Diggins contends, “liberal democracy found its educator” (Diggins xix). It is in something like this role that Philip Roth casts Lincoln in *I Married a Communist*.

*I Married a Communist* is essentially framed as an American Bildungsroman, the story of Nathan Zuckerman’s adolescence, growing up in Newark, New Jersey during the darkest days of cold war anti-communism, and his initiation into the political and moral complexities of postwar America. The influences that shape young Nathan, and direct his idea of America and being American, are myriad and often contradictory. Nathan finds himself caught between the idealistic and mythic America he finds portrayed in the books of Howard Fast and John R. Tunis, embodied in the language of the radio plays of Norman Corwin, and represented in the historical figure of Thomas Paine, and the more ambiguous and much less heroic reality of cold war-era politics in America epitomized by the campaign of defeated Presidential candidate Henry Wallace, darkened by the excesses and betrayals which defined the McCarthy era, and made personal and substantive, for Zuckerman, in the fate of the novel’s central figure, Ira Ringold.

The first time Nathan encounters Ira Ringold, also known to the world by his stage name Iron Rinn, Ira is dressed up as Abraham Lincoln, standing on stage during a school assembly and delivering Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural in front of Nathan and his schoolmates. It is an act Ira had perfected while traveling around Chicago for the Congress of Industrial Organizations, performing Lincoln at their conventions and picnics. Ira is the brother of Nathan's high school English teacher Murray Ringold, an articulate man of wide-ranging and vigorous intelligence, but it is to the glamorous, idealistic, and rough edged Iron Rinn that young Nathan is drawn—to what the mature Zuckerman describes as “the trinity of Iras, all three of them—the patriot martyr of the podium Abraham Lincoln, the natural, hardy American of the airwaves Iron Rinn, and the redeemed roughneck from Newark's First Ward Ira Ringold” (*Communist* 23). In Ira, Nathan believes he has found the personification of the romantic and heroic conception of American democracy that animated the books and radio plays on which his imagination fed, and also a figuration of manhood as experienced, passionate, and defiantly independent toward which he aspired.

Ultimately, of course, what Ira ends up embodying for Nathan are the contradictions and abatements which experience imposes on the lyrical and heroic conceptions of American democracy and of manhood that kindled his youthful idealism. Into the heady mix of Corwin's “high demotic poetry” confirming “the reality of the myth of the national character,” and the Tom Paine-inspired reverence for the defiant individual burning with populist conviction, Ira introduces what Nathan, at one point, refers to as “firsthand evidence of all the brutish American stuff” that was not to be found in the books or on the radio

programs that, up until his meeting Ira, had been his window on the larger world (39; 38; 49). Ira exposes Nathan's "native-son" enthusiasm and nascent political sensibility to the gloom of hypocrisy, opportunism, dogmatism, and personal animosity that is as much a feature of the American political landscape as democratic idealism and the exercise of liberal freedom—a gloom, as Roth's novel emphasizes, which was especially prevalent during what came to be known as the McCarthy era.

*I Married a Communist*, however, is not a novel that revisits that infamous period of American history in order to issue a passionate condemnation of the figures and events central to its anti-communist witch-hunts as Robert Coover does in *The Public Burning*, or to undertake an explanation/ apology for the New Left politics of the 1960s which arose in reaction to the virulent anti-communism of the 1950s as E.L Doctorow does in *The Book of Daniel*<sup>10</sup>, rather Roth's novel calls attention to the lingering smell of the tawdriness and sensationalism of McCarthy-style politics in the mélange of sanctimoniousness and prurience that Roth detects in the tabloid world of scandal and spectacle which characterizes so much of contemporary American public life. A sense of the very real impact that McCarthy had on public and private life in America—as one historian of the period puts it, “directly or indirectly he shattered countless lives and seemed to inflict a mood of fear and suspicion on American life as a whole”—is by no means missing from *I Married a Communist*, but in his depiction of Ira Ringold's fall from celebrity grace, Nathan Zuckerman's disenchantment with both his personal

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<sup>10</sup> In *Political Fiction and the American Self*, John Whalen-Bridge points to Doctorow's novel as a consummate example of an “indisputable political book” commenting that, “from beginning to end, Doctorow's *Book of Daniel* measures out as much justification as possible for the excesses of the New Left” (Whalen-Bridge 4).

hero Ira and with the heroic America which had fueled his youthful patriotism, and Murray Ringold's Shakespeare-infused insights into the nature of power, Roth displays a greater interest in dramatizing how American politics is intimately entangled in "the thousand and one dualities that twist its nature into the human knot" than in the grim details of the House Un-American Activities Committee or the Rosenberg case (Rogin 2; *Communist* 280). What underlies the political tone of the novel is not shock, outrage, or even bafflement at the theatre of human cruelty, frailty, and simple-mindedness that gripped American life during the McCarthy years, but rather Roth's mix of fascination and disheartenment at what Murray Ringold refers to as "the postwar triumph of gossip as the unifying credo of the world's oldest democratic republic" (284).

Considering the saliency of the novel's characterization of "McCarthyism as the first postwar flowering of the American unthinking that is now everywhere," it is tempting to ascribe the Lincolnian presence in the novel, particularly considering its manifestation in the rather unlikely guise of radio actor and committed communist Ira Ringold, solely to a satirical flourish on Roth's part, designed to emphasize the disjunction between the ideals espoused by Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address, and the reality of the postwar American experience (284). Indeed, Roth provides us with a description of a contemporary event, a significant postwar funeral oration, which stands in juxtaposition to Lincoln's famous address delivered at the dedication of a cemetery for those killed in the battle of Gettysburg and which, with Roth's characteristic black humor, trenchantly illustrates the discordance between Lincoln's appeal to the memory of the Revolution and the principles of the Declaration of Independence as the

indispensable wellspring of the meaning of American democracy, and the kind of abuse of memory and self-serving patriotic cant designed to “induce catalepsy in the multitude” that Roth discerns in the now standard rhetoric and pageantry marshaled to mark the occasion of Richard Nixon’s passing (278).

Roth, via Murray Ringold, evokes the staging of that particular piece of political theatre in order to vividly exhibit the transition of Ira Ringold’s personal drama from tragedy to banal entertainment to farce. The diminishment of Ira’s role in the sordid story of McCarthyism to that of forgotten bit-player culminates, for Murray, in then President Clinton’s “exalting [arch-anti-communist and disgraced ex-President] Nixon for his ‘remarkable journey’,” [...] and then Governor of California Pete Wilson “assuring everyone that when most people think of Richard Nixon, they think of his ‘towering intellect’,” and most grating of all for such a careful student of Shakespeare as Murray Ringold, Henry Kissinger’s inappropriate evocation of Hamlet’s tribute to his murdered father—“He was a man, take him for all and all, I shall not see his like again”—in remembrance of “that glaringly impure soul” (278-280). The loudest echoes of McCarthy’s season of personal hypocrisy, political ambition, and national paranoia—the era, as Murray puts it, of “the accessible transgression, the *permissible* transgression” that allowed “you [to] retain your purity at the same time as you are patriotically betraying”—now resound, for Roth, not necessarily in the outcome of ideological battles present or past, but in the kind of abuse of



language and democratic bad faith that transforms Richard Nixon into a “great patriot” by declaring him one on television<sup>11</sup>.

Betrayal, both personal and political, is one of the central themes of *I Married a Communist*, indeed of the trilogy as a whole, and in his depiction of the form of modern politics pioneered by McCarthy and Nixon, a politics that dresses its ambition and lust for power in the public clothes of piety for the sake of the television audience and utilizes personal ruin as its most effective tactic, Roth marks the extent of the betrayal in postwar America of those Lincolnian ideals expressed in the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural. The Lincolnian veneration for the work of American democracy, famously represented in that “long, chugging locomotive of a sentence” from the Second Inaugural that is recited in front of Nathan’s school with such a flourish by Ira, and later carefully diagramed and analyzed for Nathan’s class by Murray, in which Lincoln exhorts Americans to “strive on to finish the work we are in,” to labour to live up to the political and moral commitments set down in the Declaration of Independence, seems, for Roth, an ever diminishing concern of “the connoisseurs of deal making and deal breaking, masters of the most shameless ways of undoing an opponent, those for whom moral concerns must always come last,” which seem to set the tone of contemporary American public life (28; 278).

It is somewhat peculiar that this betrayal of Lincolnian ideals is personified in the novel by the unmaking of Ira Ringold, a doctrinaire communist with a

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<sup>11</sup> “Great patriot” is a phrase used by Senator Dole’s during his remarks at Nixon’s funeral: “Today our grief is shared by millions of people the world over. But it is also mingled with intense pride in a great patriot who never gave up and never gave in.” A complete transcription of the eulogies given at President Nixon’s funeral can be found at the Nixon Library website: <[http://www.nixonfuneral.org/Research\\_Center/Nixons/RichardNixonFuneral.shtml](http://www.nixonfuneral.org/Research_Center/Nixons/RichardNixonFuneral.shtml)>.

murderous past, however there is a distinctly Lincolnian element to Ira's story, a persistent striving that, in his brother's judgment at least, stands out as the defining feature of his life. In the work of self re-invention, of re-creating himself as Iron Rinn, celebrity and revolutionary, lie the seeds of both Ira's redemption and the cause of his downfall. Lincoln, who was a passionate advocate for the redemptive power of individual liberty, located the individual capacity for self-definition at the heart of the ideals set out in the Declaration of Independence and therefore central to the American conception of political freedom. Murray describes Ira as essentially "a man perpetually hungering after his life," a man whose "passion was to be someone he didn't know how to be" (319). Ira's struggle to construct a life in which he would be both recognized and redeemed as an individual can hardly be described as heroic—in Ira's case the Lincolnian character is more a role to be played than an example to be followed—however in "the enormous wrongness" of Ira's efforts, Roth portrays the double-edged nature of the individual capacity for self-definition, the ultimate exercise of American political freedom as Lincoln conceived it.

The individual striving after his or her life, and the propensity for bad judgment, confusion, and error which that exercise often reveals, is a perpetual source of social, personal, and political tension in America. At the heart of Ira's story is what John Patrick Diggins, following Kenneth Burke, calls the "tragic ambiguity" which perpetually surrounds the pursuit of individual self-determination in America, an ambivalence made manifest in the many encumbrances and limitations placed on individual liberty by the demands of social and communal imperatives. As Roth makes clear, what makes Ira

particularly vulnerable to the historical forces conspiring against him, to the various “traps” set for him by his era, is his perpetual hunger to construct an identity that fits—an undertaking rooted in the belief, which he shares with Lincoln, that the fate of the self, in America, should be a matter of choice and effort rather than custom or inheritance.

Indeed as Diggins points out, Lincoln’s own ambitions often faced a “tragic ambiguity,” as “he tried to pursue the conflicting political values of liberty and democracy, the self-determination of the individual, and the social determinants of society” (*Hallowed* 284). Lincoln advocated that America’s best hope for achieving the future promised by the ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence, and its only hope for redeeming the past and present failure to live up to those ideals, was to continue to embrace the often contradictory task of pursuing individual liberty while remaining firmly committed to equality as the moral “proposition” to which America was dedicated, even at times when that task seems unrealizable. In both his actions and his words, Lincoln recognized that, while too often yielding periods of conflict and divisiveness with tragic consequences, the tension between the principle of equality and the pursuit of individuality which lay at the heart of liberal democratic faith is an indispensable source of health and vitality for American democracy; while Ira finds only a source of weakness and regret in his worldly ambitions and appetite for experience, his individual aspirations for wealth, status, and recognition coming to represent nothing so much as his own betrayal of the ideology in which he so fervently believes.

This glaring contradiction in Ira between his individual aspirations and his allegiance to the Communist party—for Murray the indisputable root of everything that “enraged,” “confused” and eventually “ruined” his brother—is what makes him particularly susceptible to what Murray refers to as “the iron pole of righteousness,” that blunt instrument utilized by ideologues and zealots (of both the McCarthyite and Communist persuasions) whose morality and politics appear untroubled and untainted by the complexity and duality of human experience, by that obstinate human tendency towards inconsistency, error, and impurity which, in the final novel of Roth’s trilogy, is epigrammatized by the phrase “the human stain.” From Ira’s impersonation of Lincoln as part of his political theatre, to the gaunt, exhausted look that Murray describes as “Lincoln’s mask of sorrow” which increasingly dominates Ira’s appearance as the weight of his own inadequacies and the personal and political betrayals of his era take their toll, the ironic motif, in *I Married a Communist*, of Ira Ringold’s resemblance to Lincoln underlines the ambiguities and dualities of the human entanglements and individual motives that Roth constantly points to as the inescapable historical concomitant to the American democratic ideal (*Communist* 283). It also serves to underscore one of Roth’s central political observations in the novel—that when it comes to grappling with the complexities and contradictions at work in both the high aspirations and the sordid realities of the American experience, “purity is a lie” and the simplifying certainties of self-righteousness a dangerous individual and communal infatuation (318).

Passing Dangers: Self-Construction and Sanctimony in *The Human Stain*

“For all their traditional antagonisms and obvious differences, the so-called black and so-called white people of the United States resemble nobody else in the world so much as they resemble each other.”

--Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans*

“Many things are possible in America, but the singleness of identity is not one of them.”

--Leon Wieseltier, “Against Identity”

In *The Human Stain*, the final novel of his “American trilogy,” Roth turns his attention towards a more contemporary period of postwar American history and finds the winds of sanctimony, what Nathan Zuckerman, returning yet again as narrator, refers to as “America’s oldest communal passion,” once again sweeping through the newspaper headlines, the ivory towers of academe, and the halls of power in America (*Stain* 2). Set in the summer of 1998, the events of the novel take place concurrently with the impeachment crisis which followed the public discovery of President Bill Clinton’s affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, and are centered on the remarkable story of Coleman Silk, an African American who lives most of his life “passing” as white and Jewish, and is forced into retiring from his position as a Classics professor at a small New England liberal arts college after he is spuriously accused of racism.<sup>12</sup> Offered as a response to the censorious and prosecutorial zeal which he depicts as a kind of madness driving the often extravagant rhetoric and moralizing coming from both sides of the so-called culture war in the 1990’s, Roth once again looks to dramatize the irony and ambiguity of individualism in America, in this case unfolding the tale of Coleman Silk’s partly heroic and partly tragic “struggle for

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<sup>12</sup> For a detailed exploration of the historical and cultural phenomena of “passing,” in America, see Gayle Wald’s *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*.

singularity,” his determination to move beyond the boundaries dictated by what Coleman regards as the tyranny of custom, propriety, and inheritance.

The force of Coleman’s resolve to escape the delimitations imposed on him by his birth, particularly to free himself from the predicament of being black in America, are largely forged by his experiences in Washington D.C., where Coleman moves in the early 1940’s to enroll at Howard University, an all-black college. Refused service and called a racist epithet at a Woolworth’s in downtown Washington, Coleman is exposed to the kind of blatant racism and malevolent prejudice that “his father had been condemned to accept,” and from which, growing up in East Orange, New Jersey his father had shielded him (106). He also found himself unsatisfied with the communal identity that, for Coleman, seemed an adjunct of life at Howard University, recoiling from what he perceived as the “overbearing solidity” and insistent ethics of being a “Howard Negro” (108).

Coleman rejects both the bigotry imposed by the “they of Woolworth’s” and the coercive morality and obligations imposed by the “we of Howard,” seeing both as obstructions impeding his desire to be “[f]ree to go ahead and be stupendous,” to pursue his largest aims and achieve his greatest potential (108-109). Committing himself instead to “the raw I with all its agility,” to becoming “[f]ree to enact the boundless self-defining drama of the pronouns we, they, and I,” Coleman quits college to undertake his first act of conscious self-definition—lying about his age to join the navy (108-109). Indeed, it is while filling out his enlistment forms that it first occurs to Coleman that, with his green eyes and light complexion, he “could play his skin however he wanted, color himself just as he

chose" (109). It is this revelation, one that sets Coleman's heart "banging away like the heart of someone on the brink of committing his first great crime," which sets the stage for his momentous decision in 1953—having come out of the service, enrolled at NYU, and met and proposed marriage to a white Jewish girl without telling her he was black—to sever himself from his past, his ancestry, and his family, and to live the rest of his life "passing" as a white Jewish man (109).

What Nathan Zuckerman's efforts in the novel, to unravel the many secrets and layers of concealment surrounding Coleman's remarkable life, clearly demonstrate is that, in America, race is a matter more complex, persistent, and inescapable than either Zuckerman, or Coleman Silk himself, envisaged<sup>13</sup>. In the end, Coleman is undone, not by what his father called America's "Negrophobia," or by the exposure of what his brother Walter believes to be his betrayal of his family and his race, rather Coleman is blindsided by what his sister Ernestine describes as the "buffoonery" of the censorious university authorities who, in their prosecutorial fervor, absurdly accuse Coleman of being a racist for using the word

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<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that, while discussing with Zuckerman her dissatisfaction with the politics underlying Black History Month in America, Coleman's sister Ernestine, a retired teacher from whom Zuckerman learns the truth of Coleman's background, gently chastises Zuckerman for not knowing the story of Dr. Charles Drew, the black scientist who, as she explains, "discovered how to prevent blood from clotting so it could be banked. Then he was injured in an automobile accident, and the hospital that was nearest would not take colored, and he died by bleeding to death" (Roth *Stain* 333). Arthur M. Schlesinger, in his book *The Disuniting of America*, also alludes to this version of Dr. Drew's story, particularly as it is taught to American students through its inclusion in *The Baseline Essay on Science and Technology*, an officially sanctioned educational tool which contains the biographies of black American scientists. "It is a hell of a story," Schlesinger writes, "the inventor of blood plasma storage dead because racist whites denied him his own invention. Only it is not true. According to the biographical entry for Drew written by the eminent black scholar Rayford Logan of Howard for the *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, 'Conflicting versions to the contrary, Drew received prompt medical attention'" (Schlesinger *Disuniting* 80). There is little doubt that Roth included the allusion in his novel fully aware of Schlesinger's reference to it in his book, and by having the apocryphal story asserted as historical fact by a black school teacher who Zuckerman describes as possessing an "unswerving allegiance to a canon of time-honored rules," is almost certainly designed to highlight the depth and complexity of the history and mythology surrounding the issue of race in America (Roth *Stain*, 333).



“spook” in reference to two chronically absent students whom he had never seen, who happened to be black. This kind of disproportionate reaction, encouraged by the growing preoccupation, amongst many on the elite academic Left, with purifying the language of their antagonists and driven by the polarizing and aggressive rhetoric which fuels the politics on both sides of the culture war, is a symptom, for Roth, of a kind of cynicism which Stanley Crouch characterizes as the “flight from the engagement that comes of understanding the elemental shortcomings of human existence as well as the founding fathers did” (Crouch 10). For Roth and Crouch, such cynicism, particularly as it manifested itself in the moral and political landscape of the 1990’s with the enforcement of campus speech codes, the growing chorus of lamentations about the decline of traditional virtues and community values, and the self-righteous and grandstanding calls to “excise the erection from the executive branch,” will always be at odds with the American aspiration towards an heroic individuality because it fundamentally fails “to address the tragic optimism at the center of the metaphor that is the Constitution” (Roth, *Stain* 2; Crouch 10).

There is little doubt that for both Roth and Crouch, issues of race and ethnicity are unavoidable when examining or discussing the unfolding story and meaning of the American experience, but to oversimplify or sentimentalize the nature of identity in America, to brush aside the complexity, variety, and slipperiness of individual identities and interests in order to elevate the principle of group difference or the proprieties of tradition to the level of political and moral orthodoxy, promotes an impoverished and limited conception of individuality that fails to appreciate what Crouch calls the “mysteries of human appetite” and what

Roth describes in the novel as “every perplexity pumping the human imagination” (Crouch xiv; Roth, *Stain* 333). As Ross Posnock points out, “Coleman’s decision to pass as a Jew is presented by Roth as a practical solution to his quest for self-invention rather than as ratifying a cultural/ racial identity politics,” and what is undone by the furor over the “spooks” incident is not the secret of his impersonation—in fact, as Zuckerman informs us, Coleman is buried as a Jew—but rather his “singularly subtle life” as a created self, his nearly lifelong project of self-control and discipline designed to escape the limitations and impositions of race and ethnicity on his fate (Posnock 95; Roth, *Stain* 335).

The motives and politics underlying Coleman’s undertaking are, ultimately for Zuckerman, left as uncertain as everything else about Coleman’s life. In his eulogy delivered at Coleman’s funeral, Herb Keble, a fellow professor at Athena College, characterizes Coleman as an “American individualist,” who, like “Hawthorne, Melville, and Thoreau [...] refused to leave unexamined the orthodoxies of the customary and of the established truth” (311). Roth, however, is careful to undercut such mythologizing, as wary of the simplifications and romanticizations of “rugged individualism” as of the reductions and sentimentalizations of identity politics. Zuckerman is left wondering whether Coleman’s decision provided him with a kind of adventure, “traveling through life incognito,” or was he “merely being another American and, in the great frontier tradition, accepting the democratic invitation to throw over your origins if to do so contributes to the pursuit of happiness?” (Roth, *Stain* 335). Whether the motives behind Coleman’s decision were based on pettiness or principles or a bit of both is a question left open by the novel, but what Roth’s novel does definitively embrace

is the energy and tenacious independence of Coleman's drive towards transformation and self-creation. In Coleman's obstinate determination "[t]o become a new being," Roth seeks to unsentimentally stage what Zuckerman's declares to be "[t]he drama that underlies America's story, the high drama that is upping and leaving—and the energy and cruelty that rapturous drive demands" (342).

As critic Sanford Pinsker points out, the reality of America is such that there are certain to be costs as well as gains involved in striving to "mov[e] beyond parochial boundaries" imposed by society, particularly when it relates to what Pinsker describes as "jumping the ethnic fence," and in *The Human Stain*, Roth portrays both the liberating possibilities and the tragic consequences of Coleman's oppositional conception of individualism (475). Roth dramatizes the personal and emotional toll of Coleman's assertion of his individual freedom, or what, in the novel, Coleman calls the "payments exacted" for "this license he'd taken, this freedom he'd sounded, the choices he had dared to make" —the alienation from his family, the lying to his wife and children, the need to maintain constant vigilance and control in all aspects of his life, and, perhaps most enraging for Coleman, the frustration of not being able to use the truth of his identity to defend himself against the specious allegations of racism levied against him, the battle over which, as Coleman sees it, drove his wife to suffer a fatal stroke (Roth *Stain*, 136).

In many ways Roth formulates Coleman Silk's story to serve as a cautionary tale regarding the inherent danger of deceiving oneself concerning the sovereignty of the individual will, of underestimating, willfully or idealistically,

the role played by race, ethnicity, and other social forces, in determining and defining the historical circumstances which shape the fate of the individual in America. Coleman is undoubtedly guilty of such overreaching, and he is left ill prepared for the “tyrannical” forces of propriety when they emerge to demand appropriateness, define the acceptable, and “enact the astringent rituals of purity” or what Stanley Crouch refers to as the “flagellation rituals” that often “pretend [...] to have something to do with the blue steel facts of unfairness in our country and in the history of the world” (Roth *Stain*, 2; Crouch 34). Inevitably, the long and tragic history of race in America casts too complex and inescapable a shadow for even the skilled boxer and “greatest of the great *pioneers* of the I” Coleman “Silky” Silk to duck forever, just as, for Roth, the optimism and singularity of the life lived by Dean Silk should have proven too complex and extraordinary, too marked by the desires, perplexities, and impurities of being human, the “stain that *precedes* disobedience, that *encompasses* disobedience and perplexes all explanation and understanding,” to be so utterly derailed by the utterance of one word (Roth *Stain*, 108; 242).

The central irony on which Roth ruminates in *The Human Stain*, just as he does in *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*, is that while the tension between the aspirations of the individual and what Zuckerman calls the “we that is inescapable: the present moment, the common lot, the current mood, the mind of one’s country, the stranglehold of history that is one’s own time” is a recurring source of divisiveness, antagonism and discord in American life, it is exactly this conflict between the demands of self and those of society, the perpetual struggle of the individual, whether alone or in groups, to free itself from the limitations and

constraints imposed by society, which often accounts for the progress America has made towards the realization of the ideals that cluster around the liberal democratic conception of America expressed in its founding documents. Undoubtedly Roth affirms his protagonists' drive towards self-creation and their desire to fulfill their individual possibilities, the individualist sensibility that is, in various ways, represented in the stories of "Swede" Levov, Ira "Iron Rinn" Ringold, and Coleman "Silky" Silk, but in each case his affirmation is significantly tempered by a sense of the great distance which still exists between the promise of American democratic ideals and the often tragic and destructive ways that the historical forces of inequality, incivility, and injustice continue to leave their indelible mark on both the individual American stories he tells in his trilogy, and on the larger story of postwar American liberal democracy with which they are intertwined.

## CONCLUSION

The American novelist, like every American, finds him or herself in the middle of an on-going and continuous democratic dialogue. In the past, novelists in America have played a significant role in engaging, shaping, and sometimes directing that dialogue, often powerfully articulating the central issues and themes that were at stake in the political debates and discussions of the day. As was mentioned in the introduction, it is Ralph Ellison's contention that it has been and remains an important function of the American novel to take up the challenge of bringing the fundamental principles on which that dialogue is based into its aesthetic and literary arena, as part of the important work of constantly revisiting the liberal democratic conception of America, both as a means of doing justice to the complexity and diversity of the American experience, and as a means of calling America to account regarding the liberal democratic debts, promised by the ideals on which the nation was founded, which remain unpaid. This can, of course, be perceived as a limited and limiting political vision for the American novel, but for the four novelists whose work provides the focus of this study, it continues to provide a framework from which to both express their discontent concerning the present state of American liberal democracy, and to affirm its ideals and principles.

The underlying force that continually drives and animates political discussion and debate in America is the fundamental tension that exists in a liberal democracy between the principle of liberal individualism and the demands of democratic equality. This dynamic and often contradictory relationship between liberty and democracy provides the terms and framework on which the political

and social struggles over the legitimacy and authority of democratic practices and institutions in America are waged, and also, as I have argued, grounds many of the thematic concerns which are explored in the novels discussed above. The four central liberal democratic themes which frame this study—citizenship, legitimacy, justice, and individualism—provide points of departure from which the concerns, perspectives, and issues that one confronts in the particular novels under consideration, can be explored, and the nature of the imaginative and literary resources each novelist brings to the on-going dialogue and debate regarding the state and nature of American liberal democracy, can be better understood.

It is also important to note how these central themes intersect and overlap in and amongst the work of these four novelists. Norman Mailer's concern regarding the crisis of citizenship that he perceives as directly associated with the ascension of apolitical and corporatist forces in postwar America, leads him to presciently consider, in *The Naked and the Dead*, the challenge which a technocratic and democratically illegitimate form of politics poses to the health and vitality of the American liberal democratic imagination, which as he conceives of it, thrives on the energizing conflict between conservatism and liberalism that technocorporatism seeks to exorcise from the political arena. In search of a vitalizing and dynamic notion of political participation with which to respond to the stagnant vision of politics advanced by technocorporatism, Mailer looks, in *The Armies of the Night*, to affirm the existential aspects of American democracy, that link between political freedom and existential action which, for Mailer, constitutes the "revolutionary" idea of American democratic citizenship.



Mailer's concern regarding the manner in which state power, in postwar America, increasingly functions beyond the legitimating boundaries of democratic political practices and processes is one that he shares with Thomas Pynchon, who throughout his work, but particularly in *Vineland*, calls attention to the intensification and expansion of state power in the postwar era, a development which, for Pynchon, directly contradicts the political and moral commitment to individualism and democracy which he holds as central to the idea of America. Mailer also shares an interest, which he explores most extensively in *Harlot's Ghost*, in the erosion of faith in democratic legitimacy and political agency, with Don DeLillo, who in *Libra*, dramatizes the extent to which the postwar obsession with secrecy and bureaucracy, particularly prevalent during the cold war, has elevated the influence which paranoia, anxiety, and suspiciousness exert on the American political imagination.

In *Underworld*, DeLillo delves deep into the cynicism, skepticism, and anxiety which tightened its grip on American life throughout the cold war, exploring both the broad influence on the American psyche, and the almost mystical significance assumed by the most banal details, of life under the threat of nuclear destruction. *Underworld* depicts the American imagination as haunted by the twin apocalyptic forces of weapons and waste, and which, finally emerging out from under the dark cloud of the Bomb, finds itself confronted by the disorienting and overwhelming forces of globalization which appears to function well beyond the control of any political entity or process, democratically legitimate or not. Thomas Pynchon too casts his critical eye on the economic and technological conception of progress that seems to be the driving force of contemporary

American history, and like DeLillo, he looks to counter that seemingly implacable force by marking, in his fiction, the cost, both personal and political, of defining progress purely in economic terms. Similar to the sense of nostalgia for a mode of public experience and sense of common solidarity which DeLillo evokes with his baseball motif in *Underworld*, Pynchon also looks back to the recent American past, in *Vineland*, in order to recover a more hopeful and vital sense of possibility than seems to be currently available to the contemporary political left in America.

In *Vineland*, Pynchon dramatizes the fading influence of a conception of progress rooted in the advancement of social justice which populist and progressive movements in America have contributed to the larger story of American democracy. Dispirited by the co-option and fragmentation of organized labour after WW II, the corruption of the liberal democratic ideals of the New Left by the temptations of radicalism and consumerism, and the ascension of neo-conservatism during the Reagan years, the forces of progressivism and liberalism in contemporary America, are increasingly, for Pynchon, being rendered anachronistic. Philip Roth, like Pynchon, writes with a strong sense of lament in *American Pastoral* for the spirit of democratic hopefulness and individual possibility that inspired visions of a common American future in the years immediately following WW II. Such hope, for Roth, must always be tempered by an awareness of the experience of injustice, inequality, and intolerance in American life, but to completely reject the vision of a common America rooted in a shared aspiration for individual freedom, as the more radical elements of the New Left did during the Vietnam era, is, for Roth, to indulge a kind of cynical

individualism that has had a disastrous impact on the fate of liberalism in contemporary America.

Indeed, it is the way that the contingencies of history and the provisionalities of politics conspire to pull at the seams that bind the democratic idea of a common America with liberalism's aspiration for individual freedom that is the overarching theme of Roth's "American trilogy." Dramatizing three episodes in postwar American history when the tension between self-creation and social determination strained the framework of the liberal democratic consensus, yielding periods of intense conflict and divisive politics, Roth revisits the dangers that always threaten the individualist sensibility in America. In *The Armies of the Night*, Norman Mailer also recognizes that the political sphere is a dangerous place for the individual, but like Roth, Mailer acknowledges that, with all its attendant dangers, the struggle to free the self from the limitations and constraints of custom, inheritance, and restrictive social imperatives, often inspired by the myth of American individualism, is a primary means by which the movement towards liberal democratic ideals in America is realized.

I have also sought to demonstrate how the perspectives which these four novelists offer on these central liberal democratic themes relate to the key ideas and criticisms of some of postwar America's most important and original thinkers on the subject: political philosophers such as Sheldon Wolin and George Kateb, historians such as John Patrick Diggins and Alan Brinkley, and social commentators such as Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and Christopher Lasch. Also of vital importance are the imaginative and literary resources that these novelists bring to bear as they explore their political themes, and a specific concern of this

study has been to call attention to how Roth's and Pynchon's engagement with the pastoral tradition in American literature, and DeLillo's and Mailer's utilization of Gothic conventions, helps to shape and influence the manner in which each author addresses political ideas and issues in their work.

Indeed it is at those points, at which the novelist's literary and imaginative preoccupations and concerns overlap with the perspectives and conceptual approaches associated with the study of American liberal democracy by specific political thinkers and historians, that the role of the novelist in the on-going debate surrounding liberal democracy in America appears most compelling. Thus, when Norman Mailer's self-declared "left-conservatism," his concern for the "idea of the revolutionary" which he argues lies at the center of the American democratic tradition, compels him to reaffirm the existential elements of democratic citizenship in America, he produces a novel, *The Armies of the Night*, which effectively dramatizes the understanding of the kind of liberalism peculiar to America put forward by historians John Patrick Diggins and Samuel Huntington, a form of politics which works on the principle that conflict is the child of consensus. And Don DeLillo, whose utilization of Gothic conventions to convey the haunting of the postwar American imagination by the secretive and democratically illegitimate exercise of power—by the state in *Libra* and by the forces of globalization in *Underworld*—captures the dominant tones of paranoia and cynicism in American culture, that worry thinkers like Richard Rorty who are concerned that in the face of globalization and rampant consumerism, the sense of political agency vital to the spirit of American democracy is being subsumed by a "spirit of detached spectatorship" (Rorty, *Achieving*, 11).

Simply characterizing Thomas Pynchon's work as an example of a contemporary jeremiad, as some critics have done, has the reductive effect of narrowing his rather sophisticated and often pragmatic critique of democratic institutions and the state of liberalism in postwar America to the status of a straightforward idealistic moral utopianism. In *Vineland* particularly, Pynchon's political perspective is much more complex and subtle than the conventions of the jeremiad would allow, though he does self-consciously evoke the American literary tradition of pastoralism as an element of his self-confessed Ludditism. *Vineland* does contain a devastating satire on the expansion and intensification of state and corporate power in America, a phenomenon that Sheldon Wolin refers to as the "megastate," and certainly takes a hard look at the consequences of the failure of the sixties revolution and the New Left, particularly as it aided the ascension of neo-conservatism and Reaganism in the 1980's. However, Pynchon also takes seriously the sense of political hope and possibility which gave rise to American reform movements, flawed as they surely were, such as progressivism, populism, and the sixties counterculture, and recognizes that the basis of that sense of possibility must be recaptured if the left in America is to rekindle the political potency necessary to reverse the declining influence of the principles of social justice on American political life and counter the ascendant forces of neo-conservatism in America. Like Christopher Lasch and Stanley Cavell, Pynchon looks to the moral pragmatism of Ralph Waldo Emerson for a source of this necessary resiliency and unearths Emerson's principle of compensation, a vision of justice that asserts its practical capacity to keep faith with the moral sentiments

of liberal democratic progress even when confronted with the forces of injustice and inequality on the march as Pynchon portrays them in Reagan-era America.

Philip Roth also engages the American literary tradition of pastoralism in his "American trilogy," however his interests lie in the image it offers of the American Adam, the archetypal figure of the self-reliant and innocent American individual confronting the dangers and demands of history and society. Roth revisits the myth of the American Adam as a means of both affirming the promise of self-creation and individual possibility which the Adamic figure represents, and of dramatizing the ever-present conflict between the aspirations of individualism and the demands of history, society, and politics in America, a conflict which, as Roth's trilogy demonstrates, too often yields periods of divisiveness and intolerance with tragic consequences for both the individual and the nation. In this way Roth calls attention to what George Kateb has termed "the doctrine of democratic individuality," or the notion that one can know the meaning of individuality in America only when it is indissociably connected to the aspirations of democracy. In the individualist sensibilities of his protagonists, and his portrayal of their tragic fates, Roth considers the irony and ambiguity of this doctrine, finding within its scope both the seeds of progress towards a common American future and the source of further divisiveness and conflict as the encumbrances and limitations imposed by history continue to weigh on American life in the present.

As represented by the vigorous and trenchant critiques of postwar America that Mailer, Pynchon, DeLillo, and Roth include as a central element of their fiction, there remains a significant gap between the liberal democratic ideals that

America professes and their social, political, and cultural realization. However, from Mailer's personal excavations of the existential ground of democratic citizenship in *The Armies of the Night* and Pynchon's inability, in *Vineland*, to look towards the American future without the lens of a half-pragmatic, half-Emersonian hope for a renewed sense of social justice, to the persistent yearning for redemption and renewal of DeLillo's characters in *Underworld* and the "tragic optimism" which lay at the heart of the stories of three extraordinary individuals and their collisions with postwar American history which make up Roth's "American trilogy," these writers demonstrate a persistent faith in liberal democratic principles and an abiding concern for the state of democratic morale and the vitality of the liberal imagination in America. By focusing on specific novels, particularly those which offer a broad historical perspective on the postwar period, I have sought to examine the various ways that these writers have struggled in their fiction to articulate a response to those aspects of postwar American life and politics which they recognize as unjust, illegitimate, and divisive, but also to appeal to the promise of America's founding principles which continue to provide a vital source of hope and possibility for American democracy.



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